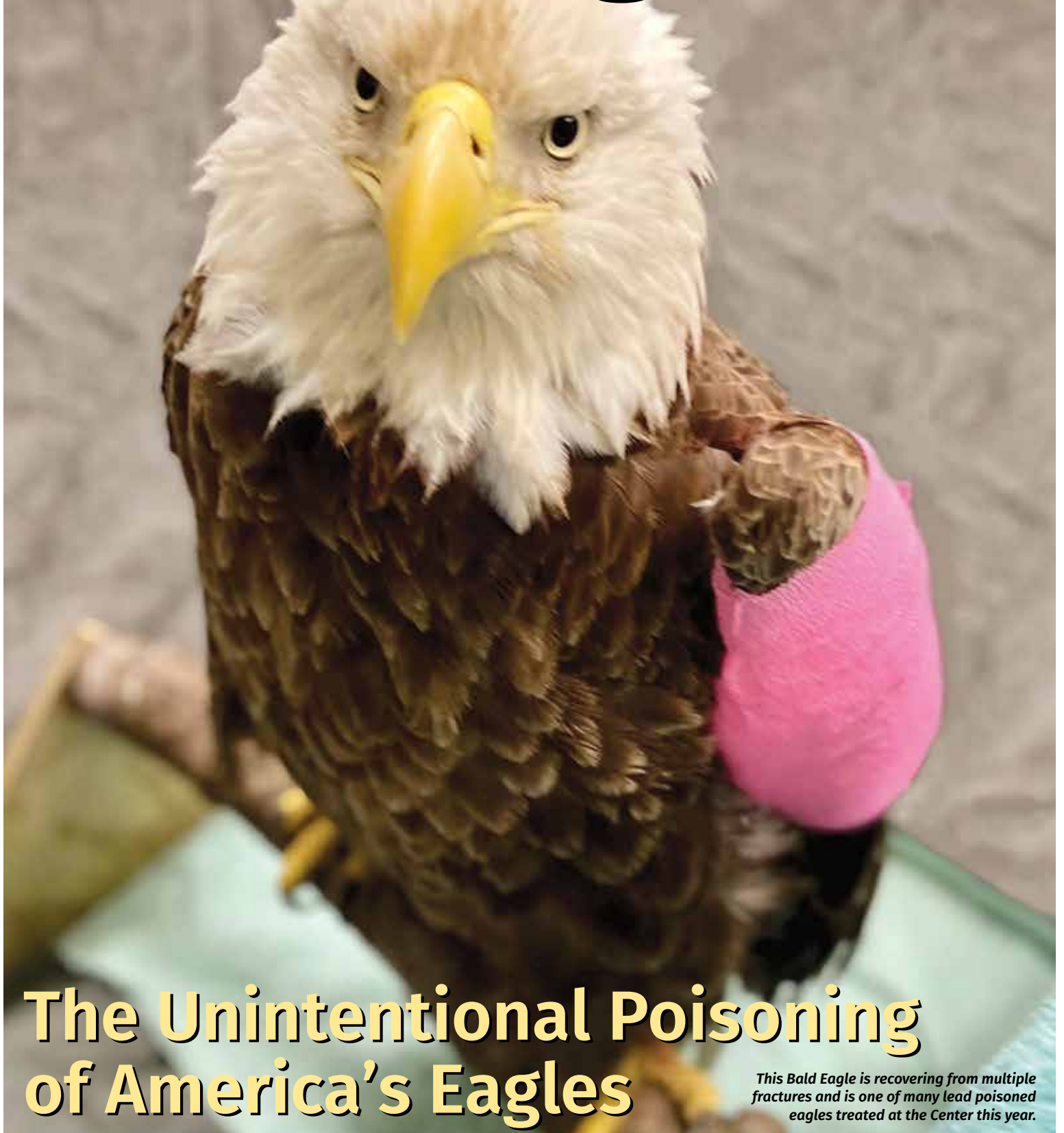


The Ridgeline

PUBLICATION OF BLUE RIDGE WILDLIFE CENTER

ISSUE 45



The Unintentional Poisoning of America's Eagles

This Bald Eagle is recovering from multiple fractures and is one of many lead poisoned eagles treated at the Center this year.

Bald Eagle Lead Poisoning | Baby Bat Season | Rehab Corner | Supporter Spotlight | Helping Turtles

This is a Special Time



This certainly is a unique and novel season. Here are some updates that reflect the current situation:

• BRWC implemented COVID-19 safety protocols beginning in the first week of March. We continue to admit and release patients through our curbside service. All finder information is gathered over the phone. Within the hospital, staff practice social distancing and wear protective face coverings. Frequent hand washing and disinfecting has been the norm prior to this pandemic.

• COVID-19 is the disease that has forced some members of the public to begin to think about zoonoses (diseases or infections that are naturally transmissible from vertebrate animals to humans). We cannot forget that zoonoses are not a one-way street though—we can transmit diseases to wild animals as well! For this reason, our use of personal protective equipment protects the staff and our patients.

• The concept of **One Health** is the underlying, true value of wildlife hospitals such as BRWC. We collaborate with local, regional, national, and global organizations to monitor the health of the planet's species and our shared ecosystems necessary for survival.

• In Issue 40 of *The Ridgeline*, we discussed One Health and biodiversity. Biodiversity is necessary, but not sufficient, for the survival of the world's species. We must provide and preserve appropriate and native habitats for species to exist. When wild species are in abnormally close contact with each other (including humans), bad things happen! When areas are not overcrowded, diseases generally flare up and die out with minimal impact to the greater population.

Giving Tuesday Now is May 5.
Your donation will be matched by a generous supporter up to \$10,000!
Please give through Facebook, our website, or with a check ("GivingTuesdayNow" in the memo).

In the first three months of 2020, we admitted 50% more patients than during the same time period in 2019! We will continue to care for native wildlife by integrating veterinary medicine, rehabilitation, education, and research. We strive for a world where people respect, support, and coexist with wildlife for the benefit of all living things!

Thanks to our supporters and animal finders! We need you now more than ever to help us get through these challenging times. Please use the envelope included here to send in your financial support.

Most Sincerely,

Hillary Russell Davidson



The Ridgeline

Published by
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Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a 501(c)3 organization caring for native wildlife by integrating veterinary medicine, rehabilitation, education, and research.

BRWC is located in Boyce, Virginia on the Burwell van—Lennap Foundation's property on Island Farm Lane.

The Center relies on private donations exclusively. Contributions are tax-deductible.

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Newsletter designed by Dara Bailey Design

Cover photo by Dr. Jen Riley.

America's National Bird at Risk

By Jen Riley, DVM

Lead poisoning has been an issue for our scavenging patients for years, but in early 2020, our patients were especially hard hit. Every Bald Eagle admitted so far in 2020 has had the toxic heavy metal in their blood. For many, it was the primary cause of admission. This is especially significant as we have seen more eagles in the first three months of 2020, than any previous year.

These birds are mainly ingesting the lead from gut piles and dead “nuisance animals” contaminated with fragments from various types of lead-based ammunition. When lead core bullets (including full metal jacket, jacketed soft points, or jacketed hollow points) hit a target, lead fragments can be sent up to 18” from the wound channel and end up farther away than one might imagine. Since the shot game are often too large to transport, hunters may “field dress” these animals, leaving lead contaminated scraps for wildlife to scavenge. Similarly, “nuisance animals” that have been shot, like groundhog or coyote, are often left in the field to be eaten by scavengers. It is important to recognize that a piece of lead the size of a



Bald Eagle patient suffering from lead poisoning. Photo by Dr. Jen Riley.

grain of rice can kill an adult eagle.

At the Center, we have great respect for ethical hunters. Most hunters love the outdoors and wildlife and they support conservation efforts. Luckily for us, they even donate leftover meat and scraps to help us feed our patients! Though we always ask those donating what sort of ammunition was used, the person dropping off the donation is not always aware. To reduce the risk to our patients, every piece of donated venison and other game meat is radiographed as soon as we receive it. In the past few years, nearly 50% of donated meat could not be fed to our patients due to significant contamination with lead fragments. In many cases, this was venison that humans planned on eating! They were simply cleaning out their freezers in preparations for this season's game meat.

We see lead poisoning cases year-round, but the majority occur in late fall and early winter, closely following deer

and bear hunting seasons. Eagles are commonly seen scavenging on deer carcasses and other deceased wildlife in the environment. They are very willing to accept an easy meal.

Lead fragments in meat continues to be an issue for our scavengers, but it is also a *One Health* issue as it regularly impacts humans. In the past few years, there has been excellent research about the effects of lead-contaminated meat on those in the hunting community and the low-income recipients of venison donations. Unfortunately, this information is not well-shared throughout the hunting community and it is met with great skepticism when it is shared. Read more at: <https://www.ehn.org/lead-ammunition-in-meat-2645108170.html>.

At the Center we strongly support the idea of One Health. Toxins in the environment do not just impact eagles and other wildlife. This is an issue that impacts everyone. Lead ingested in game meat, even

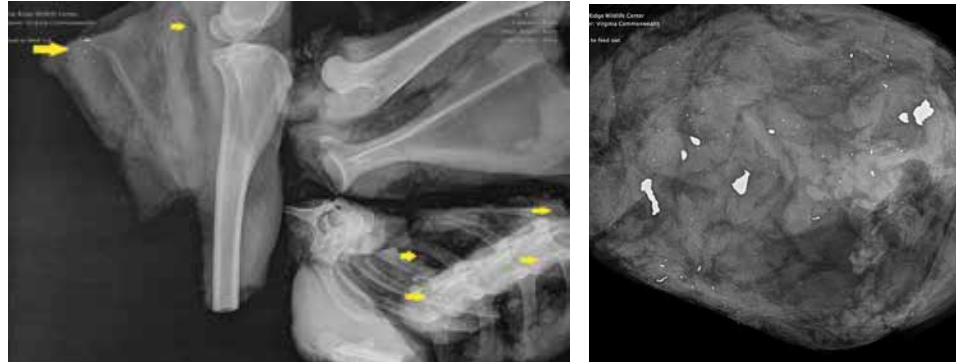


This radiograph shows lead fragments in the stomach of a Bald Eagle patient that came to us this past December with lead levels that were too high to read on our in-house machine.

The CARES Act

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into law on March 27, 2020. This Act has several implications for charitable giving made directly to a public charity in the 2020 calendar year:

- Allows for charitable deductions up to \$300 for individuals who do not itemize
- Temporarily increases the limitations on deductions for individuals who itemize. For individuals, the 60% of adjusted gross income limitation is removed for 2020. If the contributions are greater than 100% of AGI, then the individual can still carry forward and utilize the excess amount over the following five years.
- Temporarily increases the limitations on deductions for corporations. The 10% limitation is increased to 25% of taxable income for 2020.



Radiographs illustrate the lead fragments found in nearly half of game meat donated to the Center.

in microscopic amounts, accumulates over time. One study found that over 80% of ground venison contained these microscopic fragments when lead based ammunition was used to dispatch the animal¹. This can be especially harmful to growing children and pregnant women causing significant health issues and developmental abnormalities. The CDC strongly recommends that children and pregnant women (or women who may become pregnant) avoid eating game meat that was shot using lead-containing ammunition.

The good news is that there is an easy solution. Non-toxic ammunition is easily available, comparably priced and has as good or better ballistic characteristics than lead ammunition. Help hunters in

your life switch to non-toxic ammunition by sharing well-researched information and suggesting resources where they can learn more about and even buy non-lead ammunition such as <http://www.hunting-withnonlead.org/>.

Thank you to the hunters who take this new research seriously and make the choices necessary to keep meat safe for our wildlife and our families. ■

Footnote: ¹Hunt, G.W., Richard W.T., Oaks, J.L., Parish, C.N., Burnham, K.K., Tucker, R.L., Belthoff, J.R., and Hart, G. Lead Bullet Fragments in Venison From Rifle-killed Deer: Potential for Human Dietary Exposure. *Public Library of Science*. Vol 4. Issue 4. 2009.

Open House Success

Blue Ridge Wildlife Center hosted our third annual Open House event in mid-February, when members of the public received an hour-long tour of our wildlife walkway, learning center, and hospital facility. We couldn't have put on this event without our amazing and dedicated volunteers, most enlisting for an extra full day to help guide guests, talk about their particular area, and help keep the facility running while caring for patients in the background. Thanks also to our staff who helped teach people about who we are and what we do! Make sure to follow our Facebook page for updates on any upcoming public events!



Is That a Baby Bat?

By Leslie Sturges

Little baby animals are cute right? Well, maybe not right away. Most of Virginia's bats are born hairless and most closely resemble gargoyles from medieval cathedrals. But these highly unusual mammals grow as quickly as songbirds and quickly open their eyes and look a lot like baby Yoda. Once they grow velvety fur, they take their rightful place in the awe department.

However, baby bats often cause people a great deal of consternation. What is it? How did it get there? What should I do? We've encountered people who initially mistook a bald baby bat for a toad or frog and picked it up or let a child handle it. And we've heard from people who carried a bat pup into the woods, thinking the mom might find it. Neither of those actions are correct nor helpful. We hope this article will help anyone who encounters a baby bat.

Many bats are colonial, that is, they form maternity colonies in dark dry crevices like attics, tree hollows, and behind shutters. The most commonly encountered colonial bat pup is the big brown bat. Big browns are not very big—they top out at around 20 grams, but have a 13 inch



This photo shows an infant Big Brown Bat pup nursing. These are highly social animals with strong family bonds and reuniting should always be attempted when possible. *Photo by Rich Sturges*

wingspan. Big browns are fairly common building residents, where maternity colonies may include 6 to 25 reproductive females. In agricultural areas and older town centers, colonies can be much larger, but modern suburbia does not seem to support large colonies. Big browns give birth to 1-2 pups in late May through early June. Pups are 2-3 grams at birth and are hairless with dark pink to brown skin. They are born with closed eyes and folded ears, but after a day or two their ears pop up and their eyes open. They grow very rapidly, but they are not really able to fly and navigate until they are 6 to 8 weeks old. They are entirely dependent on their mothers until they can fly well enough to hunt.

Initially, the mother bat tucks the pups under her wing membrane, where the pups nurse constantly. In fact, hairless pups are tucked in so tightly, that many people mistakenly think there aren't any babies present. Once the pups have grown hair they start to hang beside the mothers, and they look so similar to the adults that it's easy to assume they are all grown up. But if it's late May through August, a bat colony ALWAYS has non-flighted pups present.

After the first day or so, bat moms have to go hunting, so they leave the pups in the roost and head out to eat their own body weight in insects! The pups grow so fast that it takes a great deal of nutrition to keep them going. Bat mothers are very devoted and return as often as every 15 minutes to nurse the pups. A few colony hosts have observed 'babysitters' in the colonies even after the mothers have gone out to hunt. The pups stay clustered together for warmth. They don't crawl about because their lives depend on staying warm and safe in the colony.

On hot days, bat pups may fall during colony emergence or as the colony spreads out to cool down. Finding these fallen pups is what often causes the public to reach out to rehabilitators.

So, if you encounter a tiny pink or



Leslie is the president of **The Save Lucy Campaign** (SaveLucyTheBat.org) and is a leading bat rehabilitator based right here in Virginia! With over 20 years of bat rehabilitation experience, we are honored to have her featured in our newsletter with this helpful and timely educational piece.



Newborn bats tuck themselves tightly under their mother's wing membrane to nurse. This sometimes leads to people mistaking mom for being overweight and without young, but if it is between May and August, you should always assume that there are non-flighted pups present!

Photo by Rich Sturges

brown bat baby, what do you do? If it's outside at the base of a wall, look up! Bat pups are meant to fall. They are extremely agile climbers and in natural roosts, they can climb right back up. But in house and building colonies, there often isn't a way to get back—siding is slick, barn lofts are empty. If you can see an opening, there is likely a colony present. Look for a spattering of guano around the opening, and if you're lucky you may see some little faces looking back at you. Cover the pup (or pups) with leaves or a cloth to protect them from the sun, but please don't touch them. Even tiny pups are considered a rabies vector, and most health departments require they be euthanized and tested if there is ANY bare skin contact. Next, you'll need a long handled implement—we recommend a pool skimmer or painter's pole with a rag draped over the end. Using



There are no lethal methods that are legal for bat removal, but exclusion is effective AND legal! Just make sure that you are not excluding bats until after the pups are flighted (typically by September).

Photo by Rich Sturges

a washcloth or thick rag, place the pups onto the screen or draped cloth. Slowly lift the pups to the opening, and they will usually crawl right in. Some people have witnessed an adult come to collect the pups, but usually the adults stay under cover.

If you find a pup inside your house, you have a colony! If you can't find any sign of a colony entrance, you can try setting up a 'pickup point' with a ladder, a towel, and a heat source. Set a ladder outside and drape a towel over the top. Fill a sock with dry rice and microwave for a minute or two (you should be able to hold your hand against it for at least 30 seconds comfortably, otherwise it may be too hot). About a half hour after dark, put the pup on the towel where the rice sock will help it stay warm, but not directly on the sock. As always, you should not be touching the pup directly and can maintain distance by using thick leather gloves, towels, or other methods of distancing. Check periodically. If the pup is still there after a few hours, please call a wildlife rehabilitator for advice.

If the pup comes back out or if it looks dry and wrinkly, please contact a rehabilitator for advice. You may be asked to install a pup catcher, which is a simple device that allows pups to get back on their own and prevents them from falling to the ground and becoming dehydrated. Pup catchers



Pupcatchers like this save lives! To build your own, see the instructions at <https://batworld.org/bat-house-pup-catcher/>.

can also be installed preventatively if you know you have an active bat house.

If the colony is in an occupied building, start making plans for a humane exclusion in late summer or early fall. Please don't exclude bats during pup season—bat pups get trapped inside and frantic mothers try to get back to them by coming in wherever they can. There are no lethal methods that are legal for use on bats, so exclusion is the only effective and legal way to remove bats from a structure. Waiting until the pups are flying ensures everyone gets out safely. Installing a good bat box prior to an exclusion is a great way to keep the colony on site without having wild animals in your attic.

But there is another kind of bat that does live in the woods and is commonly encountered in the region, the eastern red bat! Brand new pups are incredibly tiny and very pink. They sprout fur after only a few days and become adorable little fluffballs. Red bats can have up to four pups at a time, and the solitary mothers shift roosts quite often. She has to move the pups one at a time, and sometimes she might leave one behind. While she's out hunting and while pups are waiting to be moved, they cling to one another in a fuzzy cluster. If the mother doesn't return, the pups can fall to the ground and be discovered very close to one another. If you find a red bat

pup, look for more!

Red bats are preyed on by blue jays, which spot the well camouflaged family hanging in a tree or shrub. They knock the mother and pups from the roost and try to separate the pups from the mother. She will lie flat on the ground and spread her wings to protect her young. People doing yardwork often find red bat mothers in this posture. If you are in a position to help, put on gloves and find a thin stick. Place the stick gently under the mother's feet and let her gasp it. Slowly and silently lift the mother into a shrub. Collect any pups and place them next to the mother.



Red Bats are the second most common species we see at the Center. These bats can have up to four babies at a time and roost alone, not in colonies.

Photo by Leslie Sturges

The process will work, but you must remain calm and quiet so the mother doesn't abandon her young. If the mother is at the base of a tree or in a safe spot, no intervention is necessary. Keep cats, dogs, and kids away and let the mom settle down and move her pups to safety. In either scenario, it is important to go back and look for left behind pups. We find that red bats don't count well; you can wait until after dark to see if she returns, and if not, please call a rehabilitator.

As with any wild animal, mother's care is best so please try to reunite if at all possible. However, bats are prey and mothers go missing, so there will be times when bat pups need our help. Keep yourself and pups safe by calling a rehabilitator for help and advice, and never touch a bat with bare hands. ■

Rehab + Corner wildlife Crimes

By Jessica Andersen



Tie-dyed Mourning Dove

Every year we admit animals that have been illegally kept by those without permits. Most of these people have good intentions, but it is important to stress that without the proper permits and experience, caring for wildlife can cause more harm than good.

This Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) was surrendered to a local animal shelter. The shelter properly identified this bird as a Mourning Dove, a native and Federally-protected wild bird that needed to be cared for by an appropriately permit-

ted individual or facility. The shelter reached out to BRWC, and we agreed to take this bird and evaluate its condition.

On intake, there were obvious issues—the bird had an overgrown beak (likely from inappropriate diet and housing), poor feather quality, and feathers that had been dyed a variety of colors. We were able to re-shape the beak, provide a proper enclosure with a natural diet, and even introduce it to conspecifics. We were concerned that, since the finder had reportedly had the bird for over a year after finding it as a fledgling, it may have become habituated to humans. Fortunately, this bird displayed appropriate fear of people once it was given time with other mourning doves in a larger enclosure. After a full molt and improved conditioning, this patient was able to be released. *Photo by Jessica Andersen.*



Morbid Obesity in a Great Horned Owl

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries contacted the Center to assist with the confiscation of an adult Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). This owl had been kept for an undetermined amount of time by an individual who did

not have the proper permits to care for this bird. We are unsure how this individual came to have this bird in her care, but after it was confiscated from inappropriate living conditions, our staff found the owl to be extremely obese, most likely from being fed whole, cooked turkeys, which were observed inside the owl's enclosure during confiscation. The obesity led to a variety of other health issues including loss of muscle condition and painful pressure sores on its feet.

After being placed on a strict diet and an increased exercise regimen, this owl lost 20% of its intake body weight. After an appropriate amount of time for flight conditioning and the feet to heal, the owl was released.

Photo by Jessica Andersen.



Abducted Red Fox Kits

These three adorable infant Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) kits were admitted and euthanized for rabies testing as directed by the Virginia Department of Health. They had been confiscated by

our state wildlife agency from someone who had illegally abducted them and had been raising them for about a week without a permit.

When we beg people NOT to

interfere with babies that are already doing well on their own (especially high-risk rabies vector species) and plead with finders to attempt renesting, this outcome is why. These kits were likely being cared for by their natural mother and father. Although these babies were showing no signs of rabies, the fatal disease cannot be ruled out and the health department determined that the exposure to the humans in the home was enough to warrant testing. Unfortunately, as there is no approved rabies quarantine time-frame for wild species, health departments have no real options in cases like this. Testing must be done to protect human health.

The possibility of rabies, a zoonotic disease (one that can spread between animals and humans), is what prompts testing, but it's the diseases that we don't yet know about that can be the most impactful. COVID-19 is just one of many examples of a disease that spilled over from wildlife into the human population that is having tremendous consequence worldwide.

When untrained individuals handle wildlife without proper personal protec-

tive equipment and safety protocols, the risk for disease transfer (and possibly future pandemics) increases dramatically. The laws regarding wildlife are not only in place to protect wild animals, but also to protect YOU!

It is illegal for anyone to raise wild animals without a permit and the individuals involved in this case have been charged. Sadly, this outcome does little to make our staff, the officers, or the fox parents feel better about the outcome of this situation.

When you choose to illegally raise wildlife, please consider the mental and emotional damage you are causing for the babies, the officers, and the wildlife professionals who will deal with the subsequent situation, as well as the potential health risk you are creating for yourselves and others.

Photo by Dr. Jen Riley.



Virginia Opossum

Sometimes, finders do everything correctly and legally! This Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) came to the Center as a result of a dog attack. When any domestic mammal comes into contact with any wild mammal, our permits require us to report the incidence to the county health department where the attack occurred. Luckily, for our most commonly admitted cat or dog attacked mammals like squirrels, cottontails, and infant opossums, the risk is usually low and testing is not necessary. Though adult opossums are still at low risk, their larger body size and large teeth mean that they can survive an attack from a rabid animal in some cases and they can bite the attacking dog or cat to spread the disease. Since this was an

adult with multiple puncture wounds, the health department may have requested testing had the finder not closely followed recommended protocols.

We are incredibly grateful to the owner of the dog in this case for doing everything possible to ensure this opossum's success and the success of her babies. Here's a list of everything that was done properly:

1. The finder was keeping his pet up to date on vaccines
2. Upon discovering the opossum, he called us right away
3. The finder never handled the opossum with bare hands
4. The finder was cooperative with us/the health department
5. The finder agreed to getting his dog the recommended booster shot and to a quarantine period for his pet which allowed us to continue treating this opossum.

Too often, well-intentioned individuals make choices that prevent an animal from being able to receive treatment. In a panic, they may grab an animal with bare hands, attempt to feed it, or get in between a dog/cat fight with wildlife.

Please keep in mind that ANY mammal can be infected with rabies, even when they are not showing signs. Human health is always a priority and we work with the health department to test in cases where human or domestic animal exposure may have occurred. This testing is done for YOUR protection.

Though some mammals test positive for rabies more commonly than others (Raccoons, skunks, foxes, and domestic cats are the four species most commonly found to be positive in VA), even species like opossums, beavers, and cows have tested positive for rabies in recent years.

This opossum and all of her joeys did great in care and were released after just three weeks in care. *Photos by Dr. Jen Riley.* ■

BRWC is dependent on your donations to help us care for so many patients. The Center does not receive state or federal funding for wildlife rehabilitation. We are so thankful to those who have generously made it possible for us to help with so many animal emergencies!

NWRA Adventure



Two of our staff members, Jessica Andersen (r), Rehabilitation Program Manager and Cara Masullo (l), Licensed Veterinary Technician, attended the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association annual conference in South Padre Island, TX this past February. They attended lectures to stay up-to-date on the newest research and best practices in wildlife rehabilitation so that we can help the wildlife patients we see here in Virginia. This conference enables rehabilitators, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and other wildlife professionals to network and exchange ideas to help better the care of wildlife worldwide!

Supporter Spotlight:

Helping Vultures in Virginia and Internationally!

Heather Shank-Givens has been with us since 2017 and while she has been primarily a rehabilitation volunteer, she's often involved in our education program events including our fundraisers, and multiple public education events as she has become the caregiver of a non-releasable Turkey Vulture, Vega! Read on to learn more about Heather.

What made you interested in volunteering with a wildlife rehabilitation facility?

I've always loved working with animals, and from childhood until college I had actually planned on becoming a veterinarian (in college I switched focus to ecology/environmental science). After living in Virginia for a number of years, I wanted to find opportunities for more hands-on work helping animals, particularly wildlife. Wildlife populations in Virginia and around the country are significantly impacted by human society. Since the majority of the admissions to wildlife centers are a result of human action (deliberate or inadvertent) I felt it was important to be involved in rehabilitation in an effort to mitigate that, even if just in a small way.

If you had to pick a favorite native wildlife species, what would it be and why?

Right now, I would have to say it is our amazing vultures (Black and Turkey). I find that I am partial to all the "unloved" and misunderstood critters (opossums, snakes, bats, vultures, etc.) but vultures have a special place in my heart. I love what vultures represent—the ability to transform death and decay into life. I love that they are such gentle animals and so beautiful. And because they are so misunderstood, I feel the need to teach and educate about how incredible they are and how critical they are to our environment. I think this is what led me to obtaining my state and federal permits

to take on responsibility for my Turkey Vulture Wildlife Ambassador, Vega.

You recently spent two months in South Africa volunteering with VulPro—what made you choose this organization, and what was your favorite experience from it?

VulPro is one of the top centers in Africa for rehabilitation, captive breeding, tracking, research, and education for endangered African Vultures. The organization was specifically established to support the endangered Cape Vulture, which is endemic to South Africa. Having experience caring for vultures in the United States, where we are lucky that our local species of vultures have stable and increasing populations, I wanted an opportunity to work with species that are struggling (note: over half the world's vulture species are endangered or critically endangered). I'd followed VulPro's work for several years and when I found out they were supported by international volunteers, I decided that I needed to go!

I was at VulPro during the time of year when the focus is primarily rehabilitation and day-to-day care of the resident non-releasable populations of African White-backed and Cape Vultures at the center (as opposed to winter, when the breeding season is the focus). I was able to assist on several field rescues of downed birds, which was really gratifying. I think, though, my favorite aspect was simply being in the immediate presence of groups of these magnificent birds "living their lives." My daily responsibilities included dropping off carcasses in the midst of 40+ birds and I could sit nearby and watch them feed, squabble, preen, and bathe... and these birds are very curious and engaged and would often come up to interact with me. They are such beautiful and powerful creatures and it was very humbling to be able to exist briefly among them.



Heather Shank-Givens with Vega, the Turkey Vulture. Photo by Brian Andrews.

You've done quite a few rescues and re-nestings for us over the years—is there one that really sticks out to you?

I think my first solo re-nesting of a nestling barred owl that had fallen from a tree in my neighborhood stands out to me. I had to get a large extension ladder and get it up pretty high in the tree. And with the mother owl watching closely from nearby, I carried the owlet up in a pouch, reunited it with its siblings, and reinforced the entrance of the nest. To my knowledge, the baby grew up and fledged... It really felt like I had accomplished a genuine rescue and re-nest with that experience—and I realized it was not something many people would be comfortable doing, so it was good that I was involved in this work! ■

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Helping Turtles

By Jae Ross



Jae Ross is an author/photographer with a passion for wildlife and conservation. This is her first publication in our newsletter and we are excited to share her work with you!

Spring is here and Summer is rapidly approaching. During this time, we look forward to seeing the return of one of our favorite animals—the turtle! Turtles use these warm months to forage, find mates, and lay eggs, so we’re bound to see them more frequently in our backyards, along hiking trails, and especially crossing roads. Unfortunately, more activity also means more interactions with humans and potentially traumatic events.

Turtle Facts

- Some turtle species, like the Woodland Box Turtle (aka Eastern Box Turtle), can live for over 100 years and don’t breed until they reach ten. When an adult turtle is killed, or taken from the wild to be kept as a pet, it is a devastating loss to the breeding population.
- Throughout their lifetime, some turtles may only travel within a one-mile radius, which is why relocation is so detrimental. Without their familiar territory, turtles

can easily become disoriented and are more likely to become injured, suffer from starvation, and even die during failed attempts to return to their home.

- Excluding sea turtles, Virginia is home to approximately 20 species of turtles. The most common species cared for by the Center include Woodland Box turtles, Eastern Painted turtles, Snapping turtles, and Wood Turtles.

Despite increases in conservation efforts, human impacts to the turtle population, their overall longevity, and general well-being is significant. Habitat destruction and increased human development is a primary threat.

What to do When You Find a Turtle In Need

Many people find turtles in their backyards or other urban settings. Oftentimes, these turtles are removed from the environment to be kept as a

pet. Turtles require specific kinds of care and a carefully-balanced diet in order to thrive, thus making them difficult pets to care for. Removing a turtle from the wild and keeping it captive is traumatic for the turtle, a huge responsibility for the caregiver, and takes adults out of the breeding population; for these reasons, it is strongly discouraged. Also, remember that Virginia state law prohibits domesticated turtles (ones bought from pet stores) from being released into the wild. Doing so imposes great danger to the captive turtle and to other turtles in the area due to the introduction of new diseases and competitors.

Helping a turtle cross the road may prevent vehicle incidents, which can severely maim or even kill the turtle. Moving the turtle in the direction it was originally heading will greatly increase its chances of survival. If you relocate the turtle to a different area that seems like a more suitable habitat, the turtle will make every attempt to go towards its originally intended destination, thus increasing chances for danger by subsequent road crossings. If you do help a turtle cross the road, do so safely. For some turtles, this means gently picking it up using both hands on either side of the back end of the shell, and gently setting it down on the ground on the other side of the road. Never pick up a turtle by the tail—doing so can cause severe damage to their spine, which may be impossible to treat. Because they can bite at extended reaches, extra precaution should be used when assisting snapping turtles across the road. Gently encourage the snapping turtle from behind to keep it moving in the direction it was originally



This Woodland Box Turtle was released after recovering from a fracture at the Center. Taxonomy changes frequently as we learn new information. The Woodland Box Turtle is now considered the appropriate term for the subspecies of the Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina carolina*) in our area. Both terms are correct. Photo by Dr. Jen Riley



Our Ambassador Wood Turtle, Tugboat, enjoying some fresh air in the turtle pond on our Wildlife Walk. Photo by Jennifer Burghoffer.

heading. Do not encourage them to bite a stick or slide them across pavement—this can damage their plastron. Lastly, please remember to only assist a turtle when it is also safe for you.

If you come across a turtle in the wild and it is not in immediate danger, leave it alone. While a turtle's location may seem strange to you, there is a purpose for its presence—for example, a female turtle may be looking for a safe location to lay eggs—even miles from water in some species—and male turtles may be searching for a mate. Allowing them to roam naturally is important to their overall health and safety.

How You Can Help

Each of us can play a role in the conservation of Virginia's turtles. While there are available resources that provide services and information to protect turtles, you can also provide support simply by adhering to the Center's recommendations for handling and interacting with turtles. Additionally, small changes to behavior can create a lasting impact to the well-being, survival, and longevity of turtle species.

- Domestic pets can pose a threat to wild turtles. Please do your best to keep cats and dogs on leashes when outdoors and away from areas where turtles may frequent. Damaged caused by pets can be extreme, if not deadly for turtles.
- Please take caution when using lawn-mowers, chainsaws, and weed whackers in your yard. Turtles find shelter in high grass and brush, so take a few moments to check the area and safely avoid any turtles or other wildlife that may be present. Injuries from lawn tools can cause significant damage to turtles and may take a long time to heal.
- Pollution is a major factor in the decline of Virginia's turtle population. Safely discard garbage and never toss trash into natural environments. Turtles play a very important role in balancing the ecology of aquatic systems and pollution can significantly interfere with these efforts.
- Be sure to utilize available wildlife hospital and rehabilitation resources throughout Virginia that are designed to treat and rehabilitate wild turtles. It is important that injured turtles get to the Center or your local permitted rehabilitator as soon as possible. Prolonging their treatment can ultimately affect their chance of survival.
- If you find a turtle in need, note the exact found location! Without an exact found location, it is illegal for rehabilitators to release the turtle, even if they can successfully treat it.
- Never take turtles out of the wild to be pets.
- For more information on the current laws and regulations surrounding turtle handling, domestication, and relocation in Virginia, visit the Department of Game



This Eastern Painted Turtle was released after recovering from a fracture caused by a vehicle collision. Photo by volunteer, Amy Ulland.

and Inland Fisheries at <https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/nuisance/turtles/>. ■

Resources

- <https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Reptiles/Eastern-Box-Turtle>
- https://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/reptiles/turtles/turtles_of_virginia.htm
- <https://www.wildlifecenter.org/tips-helping-turtles>



Blue Ridge Wildlife Center
Combined Federal Campaign
CFC# 54098

Passing of Cheddar

We are sad to announce that we lost a very important member of our education team. Many of you may have met **Cheddar, the Red Cornsnake**, at our education programs and other public events.

Cheddar passed away in mid-February due to a tumor in her oviduct (reproductive tract) that grew very quickly.

Many people are fearful of snakes and we are happy to know that Cheddar helped to convert many people to snake lovers. Thank you, Cheddar, for showing humans how amazing snakes can be! Photo by Katie Hertrich





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Bald Eagle Release



In 2020, we have already treated more Bald Eagles than ANY previous year! Every single eagle admitted this year has had lead in their blood and in most cases, lead poisoning was the primary cause of admission. This Bald Eagle was admitted with severe lead toxicity and was recently released near its found location in Leesburg, VA. Please read our article on lead poisoning in this issue to learn more about how you can help prevent the poisoning of our national bird. *Photo by Michael Oak*

TAIL END