

# *The Ridgeline*

Newsletter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

Issue 24 • Summer 2014

**This Issue:**

**Wood Turtle Rescue**

**Short-Eared Owl**

**Sandhill Crane**

**Orphaned Foxes**



## Letter from the Director...



*Overcrowding  
threatens  
our mission*



This has been a very difficult summer for everyone here at the Center.

We did everything we could to be prepared for the rush of injured and orphaned animals we expect every spring when the hibernating wildlife wake up, and the migrants return to raise their young. We made sure we had enough small nest boxes and cages, heating pads and rice bags. We stocked up on wildlife formulas and species-specific nipples. We even had a second phone line hooked up to accommodate the increasing number of calls we have been receiving each summer.

Everything was ready except for one problem - by June we had run out of space in our 800 sq ft cottage. For the first time in our 10 year history, we were forced to turn away animals because we had nowhere to house them.

In April, we admitted 132 animals, then in May, a record number of 463 came in. Another 402 animals were admitted in June. By this time our house was extremely overcrowded and we had to start turning animals away.

Orphan animals are kept at our Center until they are old enough to be on their own and are prepared to survive in the wild. For some species, this can take a few weeks, for others, it can take 5 months. During some months in the summer we will have 300 - 400 animals housed at the Center at the same time, but that is too many for this small facility.

Our small 210 year old cottage has been much too overcrowded recently, and because it cannot be expanded, plans have been created to build a larger facility at this same location. Just in time...

We will break ground as soon as the money has been raised to build this building. We hope that will happen this fall. Please support our effort to build this larger facility so we can continue to meet the need to help the wildlife of this area, and be better prepared for next summer.

Thank you for supporting the BWRC!

Belinda L. Burwell, D.V.M.

## The Ridgeline



Published by  
Blue Ridge Wildlife Center  
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The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a 501© 3 charitable organization established to provide assistance to injured and orphaned native wildlife and helpful information to the public of northern Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, and beyond. The Center provides quality rehabilitative care for wildlife and operates the **Wildlife Hotline** at 540-837-9000.

The Center also presents environmental education programs for people of all ages. Schools and organizations are invited to call for scheduling and fees.

The center relies entirely on private donations. It receives no funding from federal, state, or local governments. Contributions are tax-deductible. The BRWC is very grateful to the

Burwell- van Lennep Foundation for the free use of its cottage and 18 acres of land on the Island Farms in Boyce, Virginia. **Follow our wildlife stories on Facebook!**



## Cover Story



# Rescued Wood Turtles



On May 28, an adult female wood turtle was run over on a road in Shenandoah County. A quick rescue by a veterinarian driving to work, and early treatment cleaning and replacing her organs back into her body saved her life. She was quickly referred to the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center for specialized medical care and repair of her shell, a service many do not know is available for injured wild turtles. This turtle required treatment for internal injuries and pneumonia for 6 weeks before she felt well again. Her fractured carapace (the top of the shell) is still healing and will take a few more months to completely seal before she can be allowed to submerge herself in the water again.

Another adult wood turtle was rescued in June when he was run over while crossing the road. The Good Samaritan who rescued him saw him beginning to cross the road as she passed and then looked back to see the car behind her run over him. She turned around, rescued him from the road, and rushed him to the BRWC. An additional two adult wood turtles rescued from roads in July and August are also recovering at the Center.

Wood turtles spend most of their time in the water, but come out on land during the summer months to forage for food and to lay their eggs. This is when they are most at risk for injury and are commonly injured crossing roads.

They are called wood turtles not because they live in the woods, but because their shell has the appearance of wood grain, especially when it is wet. They live in streams and will spend the entire winter submerged under the water while they hibernate. Their populations in Virginia have been decreasing due to water pollution, loss of habitat, and capture for the pet trade, so we are very happy to help these beautiful turtles return to the wild whenever we can.

## *Short-eared owl*

A rarely seen short-eared owl was brought to our Wildlife Center in February after it was found in the road. This owl had a fractured wing and bruising to one eye after what was most likely a collision with a vehicle.

Short-eared owls are winter migrants to this area who return to Canada and the northern United States each spring to nest and raise their young.

Surgery was needed to repair this owl's fractured wing, but the muscle and ligament damage to the shoulder was extensive and difficult to repair. The wing healed, but the damage to the ligaments limits movement of his left shoulder and prevents him from being able to fly well enough to be released.

Fortunately, this cute little owl seems very comfortable living here with us at the BRWC, so we've decided to keep him as a wildlife ambassador.

Not every animal brought to the BRWC recovers well enough to fend for itself in the wild again and not all can be released. In those cases, if the animal seems comfortable in captivity and is relaxed around people, we find them a home in a facility permitted to keep native wildlife. Wild animals are not allowed to be kept as pets without special permits from state and federal officials.



## Dangers of Relocating Amphibians and Reptiles

Have you ever rescued a turtle from a busy road and wanted to relocate it to a safer habitat? This might seem like a good idea, but actually, relocating a turtle or amphibian can cause a variety of problems.

Unlike birds and mammals, reptiles and amphibians don't travel long distances, and because of this, disease outbreaks tend to be localized. Human movement of these animals can inadvertently move a disease to a new location, which can be as devastating to these animals as smallpox was when it was introduced to Native Americans. In fact, research into the spread of diseases of reptiles and amphibians has revealed that much of this spread has been caused by people moving these animals, not by the animals' movement.

Amphibian populations have been severely affected by chytridiomycosis, caused by the fungal pathogen *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*. This aquatic fungus kills amphibians by infecting their skin and damaging its permeability which the animals need to survive in water. Ranavirus is another emerging disease that

causes high mortality of amphibians and box turtles. Last summer, testing of a sick box turtle brought to the BRWC documented the first ranavirus infection of a box turtle in Virginia. Eastern box turtles in this area are also contracting infections caused by a contagious mycoplasma bacteria and a reptile herpesvirus.

Besides avoiding the spread of disease, there are additional reasons not to relocate these animals. Box turtles spend their long lives in a territory where they can find food, water and shelter, and they want to remain there. Amphibians and reptiles have very specific habitat requirements and are more likely to survive in the area where they are found than in a new habitat.

Populations of these slow moving animals are often isolated geographically and genetically, so when humans move individuals around, they change the genetics of these populations.

So, please resist the urge to relocate these animals. If you have concerns about a reptile or amphibian you have found, please call our Center.



## Orphaned Raccoon Rescues

Sometimes wildlife will nest or den in inappropriate areas, creating the need to move these nests. This spring, we received a call about a nest of baby raccoons found at a carpet store. The store employees couldn't leave the nest where it was, so they called us for advice. We had them block the mother's entrance to the store and leave the babies in a box outside this blocked entrance to give her a chance to take her babies to a new location. The mother returned that night and retrieved all but one of the babies. We don't know why she left this one behind, but there was no choice but to bring this little one to the BRWC to be raised.

This baby joined the other orphaned raccoons at the Center who came from a variety of situations. Four were found in an attic after the mother left and never returned, three were found in a delivery truck and the mother did not come back, three others were found near a dead mother, and many more hungry thin babies were found alone after becoming separated from their mothers for unknown reasons. Another 4 orphans were found wandering around downtown Winchester without a mother when a resident saw them and with the help of a couple of neighbors, rounded them all up and brought them to the BRWC for care.

A total of 28 raccoon orphans were rescued by the Center this summer and all are now weaned and have been moved to large outside cages to practice climbing and exploring in preparation for release this fall.

Young raccoons stay with their mothers in a family group through their first winter which is why we offer these young raccoons a back up food supply and a place to den after they are released in the fall.



## Mammal mothers have a back up plan

When a tree was cut down that contained a nest of baby squirrels, a call was placed to the BRWC asking if we would raise these babies. Wildlife babies always have a better chance of long term survival if they are raised and taught by their wildlife mothers so we work very hard to keep wildlife babies with their mothers whenever possible.

Most mammal mothers have a back-up plan, so when a nest is disturbed or discovered by predators, they have other nests or dens where they can move their babies to keep them safe. In a situation like this, the mother often will return to retrieve her babies and move them somewhere else.

We asked this homeowner to put the baby squirrels in a box and keep them warm until all the tree cutting activity had finished. After everyone had left the area, the homeowner put the box of babies back in the area of the cut down tree in the hope the mother would return for them. The mother came back and carried her babies away to another nest.

It's important to remember that diurnal animals like squirrels (active in the daytime), will only return during the daylight hours. Nocturnal animals, like raccoons, foxes or flying squirrels, will only return at night. During cold days or nights, a warm rice bag should be put in with the babies to keep them warm while waiting for the mother's return.

Most mammal mothers will return to relocate their babies, but there are a few exceptions. Opossums are

marsupials who do not have dens. Instead, these mothers carry their babies everywhere in their pouch. If you find a baby opossum less than 6 inches long and all alone, it needs to be rescued. Cottontail mothers can't carry their babies, so they can't relocate them to a new nest. A disturbed cottontail nest can be put back together, and even relocated close by if necessary, and the mother will often return if she feels the area is safe again.

If you need advice about moving a den of baby of mammals, please call the BRWC.



## Great horned owl

A homeowner had been watching a great horned owl's nest in the top of a very tall tree at the back of her property when she was surprised one day to find one of the babies on the ground by her mailbox. What could have happened? She grabbed her binoculars to check the nest and saw the nest was still there but one chick was gone. She heard crows yelling and saw one of the parent owls far off in another tree being mobbed by crows.

We suspect the crows had attacked the nest, causing one baby to fall, then the parent drew the attacking crows away from the nest.

The homeowner called the BRWC to rescue the baby which we hoped could be put back into the nest. When we saw where the nest was located, we realized this was going to be impossible.

The owlet had a few scratches

but was otherwise unharmed and is currently being raised at the Center with a foster parent, an adult great horned owl here recovering from injuries. We have found that during the summer months when all local birds are raising their young, most species are very accepting of orphans who are not their own, as long as they are of the same species.



## Pileated Woodpeckers

A nest of pileated woodpeckers was rescued after the hollow tree containing their nest was cut down. There weren't any large hollow trees nearby where the nestlings could be relocated so they were brought to the BRWC to be raised.

This nest of large talkative woodpeckers took three weeks to raise to release age, and while here, they ate thousands of live insects every day!

It's a very expensive endeavor for the Center to buy enough insects to feed all the orphan insect eating species brought to our Center during the spring and summer months. In addition to woodpeckers, other species such as swallows, flickers, wrens, chimney swifts, and bats need to be fed live insects to survive.

So far this year, the Center has spent \$1,930 purchasing insects to feed these valuable species.

These woodpeckers were given a "soft" release at the Center where a back-up food supply of mealworms was placed nearby while they learned to find insects on their own. One day, we saw one of the woodpeckers pecking at the window sill of our old cottage. When I went outside to stop him, I discovered he had found a pileated's favorite food - carpenter ants. He was helping rid us of our ant problem!

## Record Number of Fox Orphans Rescued

The spring of 2014 brought a record number of 19 orphan foxes to the BRWC needing care.

Most mammals mothers are very conscientious about keeping track of their young, but once young foxes leave the den to follow their mother, they better keep up because if they become separated, these moms don't usually come back looking for them.

One of the babies we received this spring became separated from her mother when crossing the road. The mother made it across safely but when the young fox started across, a car came and scared her back. A Good Samaritan saw this, stopped and took the kit across and left her on the side where the mother had fled. He came back later to check on the kit who was still sitting in the same

spot. The Good Samaritan moved the kit a little further off the road hoping the mom would return. He checked again the next day and found the kit still waiting in the same spot. At that point he brought the cold and hungry kit to the BRWC. Very rarely have we seen a mother fox return for a lost kit.

This kit joined the other orphans already at the Center. One of these foxes had been rescued when she was attacked by a dog. She had some bites



around her face but was otherwise in good condition. Two more kits were rescued from storm drains. Another two were rescued from window wells.

Another was found next to its dead mother in the road and a few more were found alone and hungry, after becoming separated from their moms.

Once admitted to the Center, all these kits received the veterinary care they needed and then were put into family groups with other orphans of the same age. We have 6 family groups currently be preparing for release.

When the kits are 5-6 months old, they are vaccinated for rabies and ready to move out to isolated release sites where we give them a "soft release", meaning we continue to offer them food and a den at this site while they explore and learn to find food on their own. Once released, we monitor them with motion detector cameras so we can check on them remotely and follow their activities.

They continue to come back for food for a couple of weeks, but it becomes less and less frequent as they get older until most of them eventually stop coming back.

## Sandhill Crane

On May 28, we received a call about sightings of a strange bird wandering around a neighborhood in Ashburn. This bird was very large, and very tall, and they thought it might be a crane, which would have been unbelievable except they emailed photos which confirmed there was a Sandhill Crane in Ashburn!

Sandhill Cranes are large elegant birds that travel in large flocks, spending their summers throughout Canada and Michigan, then migrating south to spend their winters in Texas, MS, and FL. They are almost never found in Virginia, even during their migrations. So why was there one hanging around Ashburn?

Our first thought was he had been blown off his migration route by the spring storms and after a little rest, he would take off again on his way north. We advised the neighbors to ignore him and hoped he would leave on his own. That didn't happen. The crane only became more friendly, would follow people on their walks and even eat from their hands. They named him "Kevin" after the

colorful bird in the movie UP.

A little research and calls to local birders revealed there had been sightings of a Sandhill Crane in a park south of Ashburn on May 17<sup>th</sup> and another earlier sighting on Chincoteague Island. We suspected this may have been the same crane.

After this crane hung around Ashburn for 2 weeks and showed no signs of leaving, we decided to it was time to catch him to find out what was wrong.

Loudoun County Animal Services Officer Stack went out to see if he could catch the bird and said it was so friendly, he was able to walk up beside it and put a net over him without a struggle.

When the crane arrived at the BRWC, he was examined by the vet and blood was drawn. Physically, the crane was in good shape and was not underweight. Blood testing revealed he had a lead blood level of 6.5 ug/dl, not a high level, but one that would be considered toxic in children and could have affected his cognition. It seemed this bird was just lost and needed to get back with his own kind.

We contacted Nicole Hamilton, an avid birder and President of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, to find out if other cranes had been seen in this area and to ask for help finding a location to release this one. There weren't any flocks of cranes close by, and we were concerned if we let this one go, even in a nature preserve west of this area, this crane might go looking for people again. While at our Center, we learned this crane was too friendly toward people and he had developed a preference for crackers and bread rather than the more nutritious more natural foods we offered to him at the Center.

With Nicole's help, it was decided the best place to take this crane would be the Howell Nature Center in Michigan where these birds reside in the summer and where they can rehabilitate this species. An added benefit was that Nicole and her husband could fly him there in their plane.

On June 14 at 6 am, we loaded Kevin into the largest travel crate that could fit in this plane and headed for the airport. Nicole and Gil had taken the back seats out of the plane to make room for their unusual passenger. Kevin was loaded without incident and then took off for Michigan. Three hours later, he was joining another flock of Sandhill cranes and calls they made when greeting each other really warmed our hearts. Kevin has a family again.



## Re-nesting baby birds



It is an Old Wives' Tale that says once a baby wild animal has been touched by humans, the parents will not take it back. **This is not true!** Wildlife parents invest a lot of time and energy raising their young, and they will not abandon them before making significant attempts to save their lives.

When a baby bird falls out of its nest, the parents will resume feeding it if it is placed back in the nest. Even when the nest has been knocked out of a tree and replaced in a different spot in that tree, the parents will usually return. We've found after a tree has been cut down and a nest moved to a neighboring tree, the parent birds will find their chirping babies and continue to feed them.

If a nest has been destroyed, a replacement nest can be made out of a small plastic tub (butter or yogurt size) with holes in the bottom to allow water to drain (berry baskets work well). Nesting material can be the remains of the old nest or dried grass or twigs.

Sometimes a baby bird that cannot fly jumps out of his nest because it is time to fledge. If you place them back in the nest, they will jump out again. In this case, it is best to leave them on the ground where their parents will continue to feed them until they learn to fly, usually in a couple of days to a week. This is a dangerous time for

these young birds. Keep pets and people out of the area for a few days so they don't disturb the family.

Fledgling baby birds can be recognized by their short wing and tail feathers. During the summer months, it is common to find young birds on the ground with short feathers that cannot fly, or can only fly short distances.

If you have questions about a baby or fledgling bird you have found on the ground, please call our Center before rescuing the bird.



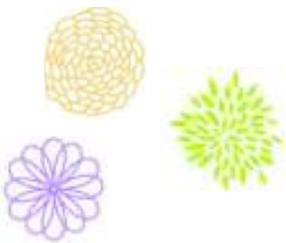


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### *Summer interns*

Every summer, the BRWC trains college age interns in the care and rehabilitation of wildlife. These students arrive during our busiest time of year when we rescue many wildlife orphans.

We'd like to welcome our summer interns for 2014:

**Ana Trejo- Hernandez**-George Washington University

**Andrea Forte (Andy)**- International School of Earth Studies

**Bethany Hatcher**- Christopher Newport University

**Casey Maynard**- Virginia Tech

**Ellis Chapman** – Christopher Newport University

**Leanna Eisenman**- College of William and Mary

**Victoria (Ria) Landreth**- University of Missouri-Columbia

**Sara Wilkes**- Denison University

A huge thank you to our hosts, Karen Jackley, and Tammy and Brian Conrad for hosting our out of state students.

### *Baby Shower*

The 2014 Baby Shower held at Long Branch Plantation was a huge success. About 250 guests attended and brought shower gifts of foods, cleaning supplies and many other items needed by the Center to help us raise orphan wildlife. In addition, the Center raised money from the sales of Bird Houses made by volunteer Ike Eisenhauer, and the sales of books, T-shirts, hats, and mugs. We also received 100% of the profits from the sale of 44 books "An Animal Life" by Howard Krum. A silent auction and raffle of donated items from local businesses raised more money for the Center. It was a very successful event! Thank you to Long Branch Plantation for hosting this event and to everyone who attended and made it a success.

