

# The Ridgeline

*Newsletter of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center*

*Issue 25 • Winter 2015*

*Porcupines are  
Back in Virginia!*

Poisoned Birds | Raccoon Recovery | Bird Feeder Diseases | Creating Wildlife Habitat



# Letter from the Director .....



## *A Wildly Successful Year!*

**2014 was another successful year for the BRWC!** *We were busier than ever, experienced many “firsts”, and successfully managed many challenges.*

*We rescued a record number 1,883 injured, sick and orphan wild animals, and helped thousands more through the advice given on our wildlife hotline.*

*We admitted some species we’ve never had at the Center before, including a sandhill crane, a North American porcupine, a short-eared owl, a ruddy duck, and a pigmy shrew. We successfully raised our first orphan baby mink. Hospitalizing new species creates challenges, including how to house and feed these unusual animals in captivity. Their favorite foods cannot usually be bought at the store. The caloric content and nutritional content of these unusual foods must be calculated so we can be sure we are meeting our patients’ nutritional needs.*

*In June, we held our most successful Wildlife Baby Shower at Long Branch Plantation in Boyce. This event raised the money and supplies needed to care for the 973 orphan wild animals we rescued during the spring and summer. Our “Furry Tails” auction gala in September raised a record amount of money to cover the operational expenses of the Center.*

*After a year-long application process, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted the BRWC its first permit to keep a resident bald eagle at our facility for exhibition and participation in our education programs. We already have a four-year-old handicapped eagle here at the Center, and we now need to give him a name.*

*Our busy year concluded with the BRWC being featured in a nationally televised broadcast on **CBS This Morning**, showing how we help injured eagles and other wildlife.*

*The most exciting accomplishment of all is that we are finally ready to break ground for our new facility. It has taken five years of planning and fund-raising, but our dream of having a state-of-the-art facility, where we can care for more animals and invite the public to our educational events, is about to come true. We are deeply indebted to all of our supporters of the Capital Campaign. Your donations have helped us keep our doors open, and have helped thousands of native wildlife animals receive desperately needed assistance. Thank you!*

Above: Dr. Burwell with the BRWC’s red-tailed hawk, Briar Rose.

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The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a 501(c)3 charitable organization established to provide assistance to native injured and orphaned wildlife and other helpful information to the public in 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 on private donations exclusively. 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 their cottage and 18 acres of land on the Island Farms in Boyce, Virginia.

Follow our wildlife stories on Facebook and Twitter!



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## Cover Story:

## A Prickly Patient

When we received a call about a porcupine being hit on Route 50 in Frederick County, we were skeptical. Was someone mistaking a groundhog for a porcupine?

Porcupines disappeared from Virginia more than 100 years ago, and have only rarely been seen south of Pennsylvania since then. But with the recovery of conifer and hardwood forests, their favorite habitat, was it possible porcupines were returning?

We sent staff rehabber Jennifer Burghoffer and volunteer Erin Balsler to the rescue. Sure enough, there was an injured porcupine in the median of Route 50.

Jennifer and Erin safely crated the porcupine without getting “quilled”, and brought him back to the Center to treat his injuries. An exam revealed he had sustained serious head trauma, and had broken off all of his front incisors, the teeth necessary for him to eat the leaves, twigs and bark he needs to survive. Would they grow back?

Porcupines are in the rodent family, along with groundhogs and beavers. These species all have front teeth that grow continuously to compensate for the wear these teeth receive from constant chewing.

It was two weeks before we could confirm that this porcupine’s teeth were starting to grow back, and during that time we needed to coax him to eat a vegetarian mush which he did not like. His favorite food while he was recovering was white pine needles which he ate like spaghetti.

Soon he was able to chew bark, twigs and leaves again, and had gained back the weight he lost after he was injured.

This was our first porcupine patient and we enjoyed learning more about this shy, calm species. Porcupines are vegetarians who eat continuously, and this one kept our staff busy out in the woods collecting his favorite foods.

He was returned to the forest near where he was found by DGIF Officer Fred Frenzel, who had seen a photograph documenting a female porcupine with a baby in that area. So now we know porcupines are back in Virginia!



Read more about his story in the *Winchester Star*: [www.blueridgewildlife.org/Articles/Porcupine.pdf](http://www.blueridgewildlife.org/Articles/Porcupine.pdf).

Watch a video of his rescue and recovery: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFRVXKjySCs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFRVXKjySCs).



The smell of skunk on a cold winter night is a sign that spring is just around the corner, but for pet owners, it can mean their pet just had an unfortunate encounter.

Skunks sleep in dens underground for most of the winter, but will wake in February and leave their dens to look for a mate. After breeding, they will return to their dens for the remainder of the winter.

## Do I Smell Skunk?

If your pet happens to get sprayed, bathing them with the following recipe is more effective than washing them with tomato juice.

### Recipe:

- 1 quart 3% hydrogen peroxide
- ¼ cup baking soda
- 1 teaspoon dishwashing liquid (Dawn works well)

Mix and use immediately. Don't wet the fur first. Lather on for 3-5 minutes then rinse off.

# Poisoned Birds



When the caller on our hotline said she had found five dead blue jays in her yard, and another was dying, we told her to bring them right over. We asked that she bring the dead jays along with the sick one because an autopsy of the dead jays could offer valuable clues about how to save the sick jay.

The finder packed up all the jays and hurried in to the BRWC. While the sick

## Blue Jays Poisoned by Aflatoxin

jay was receiving stabilizing treatment, Dr. Burwell autopsied the dead jays and learned that all of them had recently eaten moldy corn. Molds can produce toxins, some of which can be deadly. The aspergillus mold that commonly grows on corn produces aflatoxin which is deadly to songbirds. We immediately began treatment for this toxicity and by the next morning, the jay who was unconscious and unable to stand when he arrived, was now perching and eating. Two days later he was flying again. We learned there was a feed mill nearby that had been processing corn, and the recent rains had probably caused the leftover grain to grow mold. This curious group of young jays most likely found this moldy corn there.

This event serves as a reminder to all of us of the dangers of moldy seed at our bird feeders. Please clean your feeders regularly, and clean up the moldy seed from the ground around the feeders too. It's advisable to clean wet seed from your feeders once a week. Dipping the feeders in a bucket of 10% bleach for three to five minutes is a good way to disinfect your feeders (see Bird Feeder Diseases).

This blue jay fully recovered and was released at our Center where he has joined a group of young jays we raised over the summer.

## Lead Poisoned Eagle



Our first patient of 2015 was a sick bald eagle who was found on the ground on New Year's Day. This majestic bird was too weak to fight back when he was picked up by DGIF Officers. When he arrived at the BRWC, we immediately began treatment to stabilize his condition and also began testing to find out what was wrong. The BRWC is fortunate to have a blood lead testing machine which gives us results in three minutes. This eagle's blood lead level was elevated, a common cause of weakness and neurological problems in eagles. Chela-

## Chainsawing Accident

A quiet day cutting firewood turned to tragedy when an injured screech owl popped out of a tree that had been cut down and was being chainsawed into firewood. Unbeknownst to the person cutting the tree, this little camouflaged owl was hiding inside the hollow log. He didn't show himself until the chainsaw had passed right through the cavity where he was hiding. Although he was cut on the back of his neck and the tip of his wing, miraculously, he was still alive.



When he arrived at the BRWC he needed treatment for shock and pain in addition to wound treatment and other supportive care. Due to the injury to his wing, he probably will never be able to fly well enough to be released, but this handicap will not prevent him from having a good life in captivity. Seeing a screech owl up close is a special treat for the public because in

the wild, screech owls are rarely seen due to their nocturnal habits, good camouflage and ability to hide in plain sight.

Before cutting down a tree, it is wise to do a little surveillance to determine if animals may be living there. If there are holes in the tree, it's likely someone is living inside. If you have wildlife living in a tree that needs to be cut down, call our Center for advice on the safest method for removing the tree without harming the resident wildlife.



tion therapy was started right away to remove this lead from his system as quickly as possible. Treatment can take weeks to remove all of the lead from the blood, nervous system, and bones, but sometimes the nerve and kidney damage is permanent.

Lead poisoning is more commonly seen in eagles, vultures and hawks in the fall and winter when deer are being hunted. These are species that like to feed on deer carcasses, and while doing so, they will sometimes consume fragments of the lead bullets that killed the deer. These birds' stomach acid is so strong it can dissolve pieces of the bones they eat within 12 hours. This strong acid also speeds the breakdown and absorption of the lead ions into their system causing lead poisoning.

In spite of the treatment used to remove the lead from this eagle's blood, it was too late, and he did not survive. His case was posted on our Facebook page, where more than 100,000 people saw this post, and 1,000 people shared it with their friends. More than 300 comments were made in a lengthy discussion about the danger of consuming these small pieces of lead ammunition left behind in carcasses and gutpiles, and how hunters can use less toxic alternative ammunition to protect the wildlife that feed on them. It was a wonderful teaching moment for many people who care deeply about eagles and did not know this was killing them.

We were sad we could not save this eagle, but felt inspired to see this outpouring of support for spreading awareness about this preventable poisoning caused by hunting with lead ammunition.



The BRWC is dependent on your donations. There is no state or federal funding for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. The BRWC depends entirely on donations to fulfill its mission. This entire region is thankful to those who have generously made it possible for us to help with so many animal emergencies!

## Injured Raccoon by the Road

When BRWC Volunteer Dr. Edith "Pete" Verloop saw a raccoon lying in the road, she immediately turned her car around to see if she could help. The raccoon was still alive, but unconscious, so Dr. Verloop carefully put him in her car and transported him to the BRWC, being very cautious not to touch him or risk being bitten or scratched.

In this region, raccoons are the most common wildlife carrier of rabies, and whenever a raccoon appears unconscious, lame or unsteady on its feet, rabies should be considered as a possible cause. This is true even if the raccoon is in the road, or suffering from another type of injury. Rabid raccoons will often be seen limping alongside a road, not because they have been hit, but because they're having trouble walking and the roadway is an easy path. They are also more likely to be discovered by people when on a road than in the woods. Rabid raccoons are not as afraid of people or vehicles as they normally would be if they were healthy. They can often appear friendly rather than aggressive, but don't make the mistake of thinking they are "tame" because trying to handle them could cause you to need rabies exposure injections, a painful and expensive treatment.

At our wildlife Center, 48% of the sick and injured adult raccoons admitted to our Center show signs of rabies, making it the most common disease we see in adult raccoons.

Statistics from the Virginia Health Department show that in 2013 and 2014, raccoons comprised 57% and 49%, respectively, of all the confirmed rabid wild mammals in Virginia.

Rabies is a fatal neurological viral disease of mammals spread through the saliva of an infected animal and transmitted through a bite or by getting saliva in an open wound. The most common species affected by rabies in this area are raccoons, skunks, foxes, bats, and groundhogs. Testing for rabies in wild animals is performed

on brain tissue so it is only done post-mortem, and due to the cost, it is only performed on wild mammals that have exposed a person or a pet to their saliva.

This rescued raccoon was unconscious and

had evidence of head trauma, but we did not know if the coma was due to rabies or trauma, or both. He was unresponsive for two days while under our care before waking and showing slow improvement. Once we saw his neurological condition improving rather than getting worse, we were hopeful this adult male did not have rabies and would make a full recovery.

After two weeks, he was much stronger and we were sure he was not suffering from rabies. After another two weeks of exercise in an outdoor cage, he was ready for release. As with all the raccoons, foxes, bats, and skunks we rescue and rehabilitate, he was vaccinated for rabies before he was released. Dr. Pete took him back where he was found so he could return to his den for the rest of the winter.



# Creating Wildlife Habitat on a Virginia Farm

By Beatrice von Gontard



I have always had a deep appreciation for our native wildlife and the environment. But it was not until my husband and I bought our farm in Virginia that I started to appreciate first-hand the importance of creating native wildlife habitat.

Our farm is a working hay farm which produces several thousand square bales each year to sell to our horse customers in an area famous for its hunters, jumpers, and race horses. We manage our hay fields to produce top quality hay while using "best practices," such as no-till farming to prevent erosion and no pesticide use in order to provide insects for many species of birds. The hay types we produce include alfalfa, orchard, timothy and brome. These are called "cool season grasses." When a hay field loses its productivity after about seven years, we rotate that field into a "row crop" (such as corn or soybeans) for three years in order to achieve a "weed-free" field (The row crops shade out the weeds). Then we start over and re-seed the field into another type of hay.

Alfalfa, orchard, and timothy grasses were originally brought to the United States from Europe by the early colonists. They are called cool season grasses because they grow best during the cooler months in spring, early summer and fall. The grasses that are native to the U.S. are the "warm season grasses" which only begin to flourish in mid-summer and finish their growing season by summer's end. These "tall grass prairies," traditionally found in the West, grow much taller than the cool

season stands, and were once grazed by the great herds of bison, elk and antelope. These grasses include Big Bluestem, Indian grass and Switchgrass. Most of the eastern U.S. was forested land when the first settlers arrived but it was soon decimated to make way for farmland. Since the colonists planted the cool season grass seeds they brought with them, the warm season grasses are not easily found in the "seed banks" of the East. As a result, many of the eastern grassland birds have had to adapt to cool season grasses. Quite a number of rare grassland birds, however, still favor the warm season grasses, with their rich abundance of insects during summer and their shelter and seeds in the winter.

Our desire to promote more biodiversity on our farm resulted in the decision to begin planting several fields of warm season grasses. We included native wildflowers or forbs such as bee balms, coneflowers, asters, goldenrods and milkweeds. Like the grasses, these forbs provide seeds for many species of birds. They also promote many types of bees, butterflies, and other insects which the birds feed on. Native shrubs and trees such as sumacs, chokecherries, elderberries, dogwoods and hawthorns were planted to provide food and nesting sites for the breeding birds.

Because of our efforts, we have been rewarded with a variety of birds, all extremely beautiful and some, quite rare. They include Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, Eastern Kingbirds, Prairie Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats and Vesper Sparrows. The Bobolinks, which migrate all the

way from Argentina each year, arrive without fail by May 1st. The males are in full mating plumage with white backs and yellow heads. Their mating calls are truly distinctive and can be heard throughout the hay fields, as the birds establish their breeding and nesting territories. The bobolinks and meadowlarks have adapted to the shorter cool season grasses so we delay our grazing or hay cutting in many of those pastures until nesting and fledging are over, in late July. Other grassland birds, such as Blue grosbeaks and Indigo buntings, prefer to nest and fledge in the warm season grasses. These meadows are never grazed and have only been used experimentally to make hay. In the winter months, the warm season fields are alive with over-wintering birds such as field and song sparrows, which use the tall grasses for food and cover.

Another unique bird we find in both warm and cool season fields is the Northern Harrier. A magnificent raptor, this species has been found to hunt "cooperatively," or in groups, to maximize success in catching its prey of mice and other rodents. At the woodland's edge, rare Red-headed woodpeckers nest and feed in "snags" or dead trees, which are allowed to remain standing.

Scientists tell us that all living species are disappearing at a faster rate than ever before in earth's history. Because of our farm's efforts to promote wildlife habitat, we hope we can make even a small difference to alleviate this rapid decline of species. In any case, we have been rewarded immeasurably with the sights and sounds of rare and unique wildlife on our property. It is important to remember that no matter the size of one's home or backyard, each individual can make a difference in helping native wildlife to flourish.

## How You Can Help Make a Difference

The four basic tenets for promoting native wildlife are water, food, cover and places to raise young. Planting native trees, shrubs and perennials and keeping a few dead trees standing are just a few ways a homeowner can provide food, shelter and places for wildlife to raise their young. A water source such as a bird bath or pond is crucial for birds year round. In winter, keep bird baths heated and provide feeders filled with black oil sunflower seed, thistle and suet. Brush piles made of hardwood and fir tree limbs keep birds and small mammals safe from predators and warm in the winter.

Go to the Virginia Native Plant Society or Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center websites to find out which plant species are best suited to your region. A wonderful source for native warm season grasses and forbs is Ernst Seeds in Meadville, Pennsylvania. ([www.ernstseed.com](http://www.ernstseed.com))



## Bird Feeder Diseases

Watching birds at a bird feeder in your yard is a wonderful way to enjoy wildlife. But attracting large numbers of birds of different species to a central location to feed creates an unnatural environment for the birds, and that can create problems.

When birds gather at a feeding station, they come in close contact with each other in ways they never would in the wild. This contact can spread diseases such as salmonella, avian pox, mycoplasma, and trichomonas.

Salmonella can be carried by healthy birds and shed in the feces, but it can sicken and kill others who come in contact with it. Avian pox is a virus spread between birds by insect bites, but it can also be spread by the close physical contact that can happen at a bird feeder. Pox causes wart-like growths on the bird's skin, usually on the face and legs, and sometimes internally. Without treatment, it is frequently fatal. Mycoplasmosis is a recently discovered disease of finches and grosbeaks first no-

ticed at bird feeders in 1994. It infects the eyes and respiratory tract, and is usually fatal (see photo of finch below). Close contact at feeders, especially tube feeders where the birds come in contact with the round feeder openings, can spread the bacteria. Trichomoniasis is another disease spread where birds eat and drink. It infects the mouth and GI tract and is shed in the saliva. Birds infected with this protozoan lose the ability to swallow and will drop seed from their mouths. This dropped seed becomes infective to the other birds that eat it. This disease can also be spread through drinking water. Lastly, birds can get sick from eating moldy seed sometimes found around feeder stations. (see Blue Jay Story).

Sick birds are usually easy to spot because they are less alert and less active than the other birds. If you see a sick bird at your feeder, please call the BRWC for advice.



To prevent sickness, avoid crowding by supplying multiple feeders,

and clean the feeders weekly by dipping them in a 10% bleach solution, and then rinse with water. Also, clean the old seed and bird droppings from under the feeders weekly. And enjoy watching our beautiful native birds!

## "Furry Tails" Auction Gala Raises Record Amount



Hillary Davidson with Seymour.

Under the leadership of Event Chair Bailey Davis of Middleburg and Auction Chair Sandy Lerner of Upperville, the September 13, 2014

Furry Tails auction gala raised a record \$110,000 for the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center's annual operating budget. Monies raised went directly to the rescue and rehabilitation of our native wildlife.

The event was generously hosted by

Carolyn and Mazen Farouki at their lovely country estate of Claytonville Farm in Millwood, Virginia. We were blessed with perfect weather and a wonderful crowd of nearly 250 supporters, many of whom were table sponsors, patrons, or special donors to the event.

Many volunteers made this auction possible. While we can't name them all here, we are eternally grateful for their help. We thank everyone for their generosity of time, effort, and resources to support our native wildlife!



**Wildlife Tracks in Snow**

**Want to know what species of wildlife live around your home?**

Wild animals can be very secretive, but a dusting of snow on the ground can give away their presence. Next time it snows, take a walk around your home and see how many animals tracks you can identify. For a guide visit: [www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlifemapping/handouts/animal-tracks.pdf](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlifemapping/handouts/animal-tracks.pdf).

*Above photo: Cottontail tracks.*



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# Help Us Name Our Bald Eagle!



In 2014, after a year long application process, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) granted the BRWC a permit to keep a young handicapped bald eagle for exhibit and for education programs.

This four-year-old male arrived at our Center in 2013 with two broken wings and a head injury. He had fractured five bones in his wings, and after three surgeries, he was able to fly again, but only for short distances. We spent a year rehabilitating him, but the damage to his left shoulder prevents him from flying well enough to be released.

The FWS only approves eagle exhibit permits for organizations with a proven record of environmental education and exemplary care of eagles. The BRWC met these criteria and was given this approval. This eagle is still young and does not yet have a complete white head and tail yet, but he will when he matures at five years of age. Eagles can live to be 25-30 years old in captivity.

It's time to give this eagle a name, and we're asking for your help. Please send us your naming suggestions for the BRWC's new eagle ambassador!

## BRWC on CBS News

When an injured bald eagle rescued on 9-11-2014 made a full recovery at the BRWC, CBS News felt it would be an inspirational story to air on Veteran's Day. The CBS News team came out to the BRWC to film the story of how the BRWC saved this eagle and what we do to help other injured wildlife. Our story aired nationally on *CBS This Morning* on Veteran's Day. You can watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MklinjvJDw>. 



Follow us on Facebook and Twitter! We post stories about the animals we rescue and rehabilitate. Learn about Virginia wildlife and some of the things that endanger them on our Facebook page.

