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Four Lakes Wildlife Center helps wild animals and their would-be rescuers

Sick bay for bunnies and friends

BY **LIZ MERFELD** JUNE 13, 2013 2:00 PM



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Last May, the girls next door found a baby bunny hopping near their tomato garden, scooped her up and placed her in a box in their garage. "What should we do with her?" they asked me, the neighborhood's token animal rescuer.

She was the size of my fist, her eyes and ears open, in good health. I had recently learned that at this age, belying their helpless appearance, bunnies are out of the nest and on their own. So we planted her beneath some tangled boscaje in their backyard and watched her scamper away.

Bunnies like her often find their way (via well-meaning "rescuers") to the Dane County Humane Society's **Four Lakes Wildlife Center** (FLWC) every day in spring and summer.

Hundreds of younger, still-nursing bunnies arrive in shoeboxes, their nests proudly dislodged by someone's dog, or thought to be abandoned with no mother in sight (she visits just twice a day, at dawn and dusk, to nurse). Last year the FLWC took in nearly 900 eastern cottontails. By the looks of the boxes going in and out of the center, you'd think they were trading in footwear.

The Four Lakes Wildlife Center was started in 2002 by David Madden, former animal care director for the **Dane County Humane Society**; and licensed wildlife rehabilitator Patrick Comfort. Its mission is to care for ill, injured and orphaned wildlife in south central Wisconsin, with the ultimate goal of returning animals to their habitat. That inaugural season, the fledgling wildlife program received just over 200 patients.

Their numbers have swelled, with 3,020 admitted last year, spiking from May through September, when Mother Nature makes it rain babies. Throughout the summer, FLWC is overrun with infant ducklings, squirrels, bunnies and songbirds.

Winter brings frostbitten opossums, owls crippled by injury or weakened by illness, and starving juvenile hawks struggling to hunt in snow. In all, the Four Lakes Wildlife Center admitted 109 species of bird, mammal, reptile and amphibian in 2012.

Overseeing FLWC's operations is supervisor Brooke Lewis, a federal- and state-licensed rehabilitator and veterinary technician. She manages one LTE staff member and the center's full-time coordinator, Jacqueline Edmunds, who holds a B.S. in zoology and environmental studies and is returning to UW-Madison this fall for her master's degree in conservation biology and sustainable development. Edmunds is responsible for training and managing 12 student interns. Rounding out the workforce are 140 volunteers (myself included), including two veterinarians.

Together we feed, clean, medicate and stitch up our wild patients in an attempt to provide temporary respite. We

work elbow-to-elbow in a bantam red barn that sits adjacent to the shelter's main building. Its three rooms together take up a space no larger than a classroom, not counting a dozen or so outdoor pre-release enclosures and flight pens. A typical midsummer day resembles a restaurant kitchen with harried waitstaff bumping into one another on a busy Sunday morning.

"We have never been so stretched, in terms of space and time, than we were last year," says Lewis, who has spent much of the quieter winter season strategizing how to improve operations. After studying last year's numbers and attending the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Symposium in Portland, Ore., she and Edmunds were convinced that this summer they would need to focus on returning healthy baby animals to their mothers whenever possible.

"One way we hope to reduce the burden is through public education and reuniting healthy young whenever it is an option," Lewis explains. If a nest of baby squirrels tumbles from a tree in heavy winds, for example, FLWC will work with the finder to get them back in the tree in a nest box, where mom can find them.

This should lighten the load in the center's "nursery," where we feed formula through syringes to infant mammals and squirt a specialized nestling meal into tiny songbirds' gaping mouths. It's a task likened by one volunteer to the arcade game Whac-A-Mole because of the sheer number who need to eat every 30 minutes.

Returning the animals and monitoring them may take a couple hours, but can potentially save many more hours in care, plus benefit the animal.

Recently, the Four Lakes Wildlife Center successfully re-nested four orphaned, not-yet-weaned bunnies with a surrogate mother who lost hers the same day to a curious canine. (Hint: Turn over a wheelbarrow to keep the nest out of Fido's reach. A laundry basket with bricks on top works too.)

A second strategy for improving care is to raise funds to build a new, more spacious facility, equipped for more critical care. While the Four Lakes Wildlife Center is funded by the Dane County Humane Society, a private nonprofit, it is required to raise a specific portion of operating expenses.

The building would also feature an educational space, where the public could learn about southern Wisconsin's wildlife up close, including when to lend a hand and when to leave it in Mother Nature's.

If you find a sick or injured wild animal, call the Four Lakes Wildlife Center at 608-838-0413, ext. 151. Do not feed the animal or give it water.

For instructions on what to do if you find orphaned wildlife,
or if you are interested in volunteering or fostering, go to
giveshelter.org/four-lakes-wildlife-center.html.

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