

TIDEWATER WOMEN

Animals in Need: At Home & In the Wild

by Kathleen Fogarty

It's just after one o'clock in the afternoon, and the baby squirrels are hungry. Suzanne McBride settles down in a chair in her Kempsville home, her floral dress covered with an old, cutoff sweatshirt. She fills a plastic syringe with a milky-looking mixture and inserts a narrow tube into the mouth of a tiny, pink, hairless baby squirrel no bigger than her thumb. He draws in the formula, making light squeaking sounds.

On tables near Suzanne, bird cages lined with tiny towels house other wild creatures—a baby opossum, a juvenile flying squirrel, and several other grey squirrels. One by one, Suzanne takes them in her strong, gentle hands and feeds them. Then she strokes them along their abdomens with moistened, unscented wipes, as their mothers would do in the wild.

Across the room two beautiful rabbits and several golden rats relax in their cages. In an outdoor shelter, a seven-month-old river otter learns to swim and eat fish until she is old enough to live in the wild. All these animals were injured, lost, or abandoned. Suzanne takes them in, with the help and support of her husband, Pat, and her college-age daughter, Kristen.

"I feel kind of like I'm running a zoo that no one comes to," Suzanne mused.

Suzanne is one of a few dozen licensed wildlife rehabilitators in Hampton Roads. She shares a commitment with many Tidewater area women: keeping animals alive and providing safe shelter. Eventually, Suzanne's animals will return to their lives in the wild while other animals brighten the lives of humans, thanks to rescue organizations and shelter programs.

THE LOVE OF A FAMILY

Whether you live in an apartment, a condo, or a house, having an animal or two can change your life and create a sense of home. You don't have to look too far for an animal friend: we are blessed with many animal support groups in our region.

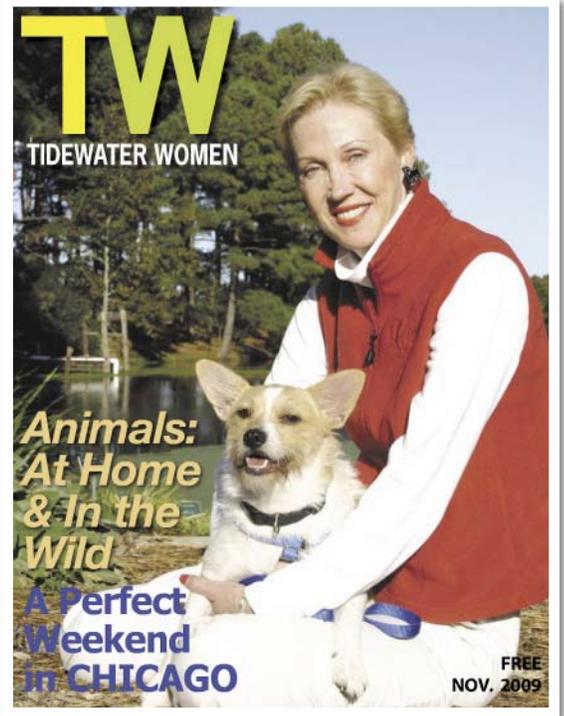
"When you adopt an animal, it becomes a permanent member of your family," said Sharon Adams, 43, the energetic director of the Virginia Beach SPCA for the last 18 years. Sharon has a special perspective on animal welfare, being at the center of so many heart-warming and challenging experiences with pets. This year alone, 35,000 animals entered animal shelters in South Hampton Roads, many of them in Virginia Beach. In the month of October, the Virginia Beach SPCA housed 18 dogs, two puppies, 90 cats, 52 kittens, six rabbits, eight hamsters, two rats, and one guinea pig. All are ready to be adopted.

With so many animals to choose from, Sharon Adams says knowing which to choose is a big decision, much more important than buying a couch or a refrigerator.

"We tell people who visit us: 'Come in with your heart and your head,'" she explained.

"It's important for folks to ask, 'What am I looking for? What are this animal's needs?' It's not about looks and size," she added, noting that some people have fantasies about the kind of dog they may want, but that breed may not be the best match for their lifestyle. An Irish setter in an apartment of a full-time working single? Maybe not.

Over the course of her life in Tidewater, Sharon has had five cats and four dogs and currently



owns two older dogs, Star and Bear, both adopted from the SPCA. She knows herself well enough to choose the companionship of dogs eight years old and older. They are so appreciative of the love of a family, and most of their puppy wildness has gone.

An important goal of local SPCAs is to maximize happy placements, while another is to affirm the good instincts of the people who turn animals in to the shelter if they cannot keep them. That includes the ones who bring a fallen bird in a shoebox or a starving kitten they found in a gutter.

“The animals for whom we care are helpless creatures, and women are wired for nurture, whether they are wildlife or companion animals,” said Debra Griggs, founder of Animal Rescue of Tidewater, a ten-year-old non-profit that supports the larger animal shelters in our region. Families volunteer to foster dogs and cats who have the potential for a long relationship with a human, while A.R.T. assists the foster families and places ads in the paper to remind potential pet owners to seek their next best friend in area shelters.

“I was raised in textbook happy and joy-filled family, and I didn’t know that there was more room in my heart for another kind of love,” Debra said. Four years after she was married, the former opera singer and her husband adopted a dog named Jasper from the Norfolk SPCA, and a 12-year relationship began.

“Jasper grew my heart,” she said. After he died at age 14, Debra’s heart stayed open. In her work as a real estate agent, she noticed the way that animals and their owners connected—or not. She began to notice strays that appeared in her path, believing that “these dogs or cats were put in my path for a reason.” She kept feeling there was something more to do and became an advocate in her own quiet way. In 1999, she formed A.R.T.

If you visit the website of Animal Rescue of Tidewater, you’ll see the dogs and cats that are available for adoption and read their stories. Debra Griggs says she welcomes folks who will provide “patient and committed foster homes” to allow an animal that has probably been moved two or three times a chance to settle. Perhaps one of those animals could be a lifetime friend.

In the case of feral cats, the kindest and most effective response is to trap, neuter or spay, and return—or TNR, for short. A.R.T. provides free spaying and neutering of cats for residents of Ocean View one day a week, while PETA’s SNIP van travels to different parts of the area every week. These kitties may never be the kind who can cuddle up with you on a chilly night, but according to Debra and Sharon, they deserve a life too. It happens one animal and one person at a time.

CONNECTING WITH ANIMALS

What happens if you discover a nest of bunnies alone, cold, and abandoned? Or an infant raccoon separated from its mom? Call Wildlife Response, Inc. This seventeen-year-old non-profit is committed to “rescue, rehabilitate and release” as many wild neighbors as they can. Their 24-hour helpline will respond within one hour. You’ll be asked where you found the animal, given guidance on how to care for it, and advised where to take it for further care. Members like Suzanne McBride have developed special capacities for nurturing small furry critters in her home while other members specialize in birds or reptiles.

“I think it’s a little different kind of love that I have for the wild things, unlike my sister who is wild about her poodles,” Suzanne explained. “And for my husband, it’s been a huge learning experience.”

Vet Tech Lisa Barlow of Chesapeake is the president of the non-profit, which serves a huge region—from the Southside and the Eastern Shore to the Peninsula and up to Gloucester. Lisa works four ten-hour days in a veterinary office and spends the other three days each week doing rescue and rehab. Her specialty is raptors and other fish-eating birds, but she also works with animals in the “rabies vector”—foxes, raccoons, and bats—and the occasional snake.

“Just today, I spent a few hours at the vet’s with a young fox, got him sorted out, brought him to my house, and then this afternoon, I tried to catch a cooper’s hawk in Green Run,” Lisa shared. She said that most wildlife she sees have been injured by domestic pets or vehicular accidents. So many animals are at risk because of development as trees and natural spaces are cleared to make room for

more shopping centers or condos.

This past year, Wildlife Response received more than 12,000 calls on its 24-hour hotline, most during the spring and summer months when young animals are moving out into the world. About 2,400 animals came into care with Wildlife Response's volunteers. The animals come from the health department and animal control divisions, Virginia state parks, and even the Virginia Aquarium. And it's time that the organization's dream of building a Wildlife Rehab Center comes true. That would make it possible for large animals like deer, bobcats, and eagles to receive expert care when in need.

In October, Lisa spoke to members of the Virginia Beach Audubon Society. Lisa reminded her audience that Wildlife Rehabilitators must be licensed by the state, including six hours of continuing education every year. And people in this vocation learn from each other; this month Wildlife Response hosts the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council in Virginia Beach for their 2009 Education Symposium, November 10-14th. Rehabilitators from around the world will gather to share techniques and the latest information on caring for wildlife.

Suzanne McBride, who has twelve years' experience in rehabilitation, will serve on a panel teaching about the diseases showing up in squirrels: bordetella, strep, and even Down's syndrome.

"We're seeing things, and sometimes we're on the front of what's happening in the world—because we're finding it in the wildlife first," Suzanne said, noting that she deals personally with about 600 animals every year. Food and supplies for these animals cost between six and ten thousand dollars annually, but occasionally Suzanne receives donations of food to offset her expenses. Despite the sadness of losing animals who are too sick or undeveloped to be released at the appropriate age, Suzanne glories in the fact that most of the animals she tends will have a life on their own, at home in the wild, where they belong.

"They have such an exuberance when they see that the cage is finally open," she said. "My favorite was the little raccoon who jumped out and almost said, 'Hallelujah!' It made you feel good that you made a difference in that animal's life."

No matter what kind of animal we find a connection with, our homes can become places of nurturing happiness for animals. As we give to them, they return the favor. A recent article in Modern Maturity lists the health benefits of owning a pet, including lowered blood pressure and assistance in recovery from heart ailments. Perhaps that's why A.R.T.'s Debra Griggs advises, "Listen to what your heart is saying when you meet an animal."

As we prepare for winter's cooler temps, a local animal may need a warm home—like yours!

- For more information on wildlife rehabilitation, visit www.wildliferesponse.org or call 757-543-7000. Volunteers are always needed.
- For animal adoptions, contact your local SPCA, animal shelter, or Animal Rescue of Tidewater: www.artanimals.org.

Kathleen Fogarty is a regular contributor to TW and lives in Va. Beach.

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