

## Helping animals get back to the wild

Wednesday, June 7, 2006

By Jesse Yeatman  
Staff Writer

Mary Martin cares for all types of wildlife, from eagles and owls to foxes and opossums. However, she's fondest of raccoons.

"They're just so adorable. It's easy to see why people pick them up when they are babies. They're just so cute," Martin said.

But picking up a wild animal is never a good idea. They can be dangerous, and even babies that appear to be abandoned do not need to be disturbed.

For the last 20 years the Maryland Department of Natural Resources has licensed Martin to help injured and orphaned animals. When she started she rehabilitated and released about 20 animals a year. Last year she helped 258 wild animals.

"We try to save everything we possibly can, but if there's no hope," such as an animal that shows signs of rabies or distemper or a raptor with multiple broken joints, then she will euthanize the animal.

The Back to the Wild Rescue and Rehab center in California is an annex of Wildlife Rescue Inc., a nonprofit group based in Hampstead. In the past four years Martin and her partner, Matthew Wilkes, have rehabilitated 74 birds of prey, more than 300 raccoons, 124 opossums and numerous skunks, foxes, squirrels, songbirds, waterfowl, reptiles and other wild animals.

Their rehabilitation success rate is 98 percent each year, with one exception. In 2002, she lost 14 raccoons to an undiagnosed illness.

Martin said she and Wilkes do not turn away any animals near death from starvation, illness, injury or any other cause.

"We specialize in rabies vector species and the raptors," she said. Of the hundreds of raccoons and other animals that can be infected with rabies that Martin has dealt with, only three have had rabies, she said. All three were from Calvert County, in areas where feral cats are a problem. All three also had obvious bite wounds.

When she comes upon an injured raccoon with babies, according to Maryland law she must euthanize the mother animal but is allowed to care for the babies.



Mary Martin stands by the poles installed on her farm by Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative that will be used for a bird-rehabilitation cage. She operates Back to the Wild Rescue and Rehab, which focuses on helping abandoned and injured raccoons and foxes as well as raptors and other animals.

She is required to have pre-inoculation against rabies. She said most of her more serious injuries are from domestic animals, but she does get scratches often from the wild ones.

“You definitely get scratches from them when you bottle feed,” she said. Young raccoons will “grab anything they can get their hands on,” she said.

Martin currently holds licenses as Maryland master rehabilitator, Maryland Rabies Vector Species, Maryland Wildlife Control Cooperator and the Federal Migratory Bird Rehabilitator permits. Wilkes holds the three Maryland permits, as well.

A licensed wildlife rehabilitator must attend a special training session with speakers from DNR and the health department and must also show proof of veterinarian support and have specific cages, Mary Goldie, DNR permits coordinator, said. Only about a half-dozen people in Maryland are trained to handle rabies vector species, as Martin and Wilkes are.

“We rely heavily on our volunteers,” Goldie said.

Problems can arise when untrained people pick up wild animals.

“Most times when people think an animal’s been abandoned, it’s not. You should leave it alone, and the mother often comes back,” Goldie said.

Martin is also one of only a handful of people in the state who are allowed to help with injured bald eagles.

“They have just been recently removed from the endangered species list,” she said. “Prior to that it was jumping through hoops to help bald eagles.”

Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative line workers last month chipped in labor and materials to help the fledgling group build a flight cage at the California location. The cage will serve as a recovery sanctuary for orphaned and injured birds of prey such as eagles, hawks, owls and ospreys.

The workers placed sections of the used poles into the ground to build the L-shaped cage, which will be nearly 100 feet long on one side and 64 feet long on the other.

Special care is being taken to allow for the requirements for conditioning bald eagles back to the wild. The shape of the cage will allow recovering eagles to practice banking and making turns while flying.

Workers also placed poles to build a second, 48-by-16-foot cage that can be used for other animals. Martin hopes to have the cages completed by next spring.

“We can’t thank SMECO enough for its generous help. This flight cage would probably never be built without the help that the cooperative and its workers have provided,” Martin said.

Martin also gave thanks to Ron Wexler, director of the nearby Orphaned Wildlife Rescue Center in Lusby, for working with SMECO and securing the poles for the cages.

Now that the poles are in place, Martin is trying to find a way to build the actual cage. She is hoping a Boy Scout troop or a someone looking to make Eagle Scout will take on all or part of the project. State rules require that most of the side be built out of solid wood and the rest heavy wood lattice. Only the top and bottom of the large cage can be wire, she said.

“We receive some financial aid and supplies from [Wildlife Rescue Inc.] and a few other groups, but most of the costs of construction, caging, veterinary fees, professional physical therapy, food, medicines and various other supplies are at our own expense,” Martin said.

Although many of the animals she receives come from referrals from DNR or other government agencies, she receives no government funding. As a licensed rehabilitator, Martin cannot legally charge or even ask for donations, though she can accept donations.

“For years after I graduated high school I worked with animals,” including caring for horses and other domestic animals, she said. “Growing up we had every animal imaginable.”

An aunt of Martin’s would take in injured songbirds from neighbors and nurse them back to health, which is where her interest and knowledge in wild animals began to develop.

Both Martin and Wilkes have regular day jobs as civilian contractors at Patuxent River Naval Air Station. Somehow, she said, they still find time to take care of their small farm and nurse the rescued animals back to health.

The trick is finding enough resources, including food, formula, towels and cages, for the Back to the Wild Rescue and Rehab. Martin has a wish list of items and spends a few thousand dollars a year out of her own pocket. The average cost to feed, raise and vaccinate a raccoon against rabies, distemper and parvo is \$240.

But seeing the small creatures returned to the wild and scamper away gives Martin a feeling she can’t describe in words.

“They’re just so cute,” she said. But, again, she immediately warned against trying to pick up or raise a baby raccoon or other wild animal.

“Just call us,” she said. She gives her contact information out to animal control offices, DNR and on Web sites. “If they can’t reach us we can’t help them,” she said.

E-mail Jesse Yeatman at [jyeatman@somdnews.com](mailto:jyeatman@somdnews.com).