

Thursday, August 29, 2002

Paralegal runs nursery of a different sort

Mary Martin's foster kids run rampant through the wilds of Southern Maryland. On all fours or on the wing, in fur, feathers or shells, they live only because she would not let them die.

A paralegal for the station's Office of the Staff Judge Advocate by day, Martin spends her idle hours nursing orphaned or abandoned critters back to fighting trim. She is licensed by the state, but spends thousands of dollars of her own money to raise, rehabilitate and inoculate more than 50 species of the local fauna.

The animals, usually infants, come to her from a range of sources. Many are referrals from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources or Pax River's Conservation Division. Others are brought to her by private citizens who know of her work. The most common species -- and her favorite -- is raccoon. But possums, skunks, squirrels, groundhogs and foxes are also regular visitors to Martin's baby bestiary. Like human infants, they often require round-the-clock care.

"I average about two hours of sleep a night during the entire baby season," Martin says. The "baby season," when most of the species she handles give birth and raise young, usually lasts from the end of April through June, though this year's mild winter extended the season deeper into summer. She must feed them every few hours and keep them warm. She must even stimulate the mammals to excrete their waste. It is inglorious work.

At The Martin Home for Wayward Raccoons ...

Martin and long-time partner Matthew Wilkes have transformed their California, Md., home into a subtly disguised animal rehabilitation center.

"You don't see animals when you walk in the door," Martin explained. Most of the patients begin their stay in the basement, in a specially configured "creature room."

The first step for a new arrival is a thorough exam and injury check. For serious injuries, Martin must take the animals to Baltimore or West Virginia, to the nearest veterinarians authorized to work with wild animals and species known to carry rabies. In her 15 years of rehabbing, she has never had an animal test positive for rabies.



Public Affairs Photos
A handful: These baby possums, part of a large litter, will require round-the-clock attention until they are weaned onto solid food.



Baby bandito: An orphaned raccoon suckles at a bottle of specialized formula delivered by animal rescuer Mary Martin.

Infant mammals spend their first 24 hours on a diet of fluid called Ringers lactate, delivered in a baby bottle. The Ringers helps clear the mother's milk from their systems. Baby birds get dry cat or dog food soaked in vitamin-laced water.

After the first day, mammals graduate up to specialized zoological baby formulas that are customized for individual species. The formula runs about \$75 for five pounds of dry mix; like the money for the vet bills, it all comes out of Martin's pocket. She estimates it costs about \$240 to care for a single raccoon from arrival to release. She has rehabbed 53 raccoons so far this season.

As the young animals develop, they are transitioned out of the house into one of two large cages Wilkes has constructed in a barn out back. Measuring eight feet by 16 and 16 feet square, respectively, they are stocked with everything an adolescent wild thing could want. The raccoon cage boasts hanging tree branches on which to learn climbing, Fisher-Price toys and playhouses, and a pool stocked with minnows for honing vital angling skills.

"Boredom is their biggest enemy," Martin says of the raccoons. "They get bored and then they get nasty."

While out in the cages, they learn to eat natural foods. Besides the minnows, Martin keeps a stock of munchable mice in the freezer; "micicles," she explains with an apologetic smile.

During this period she keeps human interaction to a minimum. The animals aren't pets, and she doesn't treat them as such.

All creatures great and small

Each species has its peculiar challenges and rewards. Squirrels are the "problem children" in her life.

"They're a lot of fun but ... there's no in-between with squirrels," she said. They can be playful and sweet one minute, then singularly belligerent the next, inclined to bite the hand that feeds. "They're not very grateful."

Skunks are, well, a tad stinky. Though they don't usually spray when they are young, they release some scent every time they pass waste. "They're one of the ones you get out of your house as soon as possible," Martin says.

Possoms are plentiful, arriving in litters of up to 12 babies. Being marsupials, they are not fully formed when born, and continue to develop in the mother's pouch, Martin explains.

"I've had people bring me dead mothers with live babies in the pouch," she adds. And yes, during baby season, she does check roadkill for infant survivors.

Not all of her wards come to her as babies. Some are injured and just need a safe place to recover.

One young raccoon in her care was mauled by adult raccoons and arrived with three broken legs. "He's climbing now and will be releasable," she said.

Others are victims of abuse only a human could conceive.

One of Martin's friends, a fellow rehabilitator, once took in a turtle that had been smashed with a sledgehammer by the employees of a local store. The blow drove a circle of shell into the animal's back, almost crushing its spine. The friend saved the turtle's life, though the circle of shell remains recessed in the turtle's back. She jokes that the turtle looks like a walking cup holder, then wonders at the oafish delight that small minds derive from random cruelty.

Empty nest syndrome

When fall comes around, it is time to start thinking release. Over the years, 98 percent of the animals she has taken in have survived to release ? until this year. An epidemic of unknown disease killed 14 of her raccoons this season.

Before they go anywhere, Martin inoculates all her animals for parvo, distemper and rabies. Then they are ready to begin a "soft release," in specialized kennels Wilkes constructed for the purpose. The chain link kennels are 10 feet on a side, with a wire roof and floor, and connect to a large wooden shed. The entire assembly is placed in a suitable location, often in a wooded area, and the animals are locked inside. The little neophytes get exposure to the wild while still having food and water provided, all in the protection of the predator-proof kennel.

After a week or more, the escape hatch is opened, and the animals can leave when they are ready. Time after time, this stage is just as painful for Martin, who has sat up nights nursing the animals from before they could even open their eyes. She knows she is turning her children back over to Mother Nature, who is indifferent and wholly without sympathy.

"Some people may not get as attached," she says, "but I cry like a baby."

Release sites are at a premium. "Anybody who has property and is willing to let us release wild animals, we're desperate for that," Martin said. She has also worked with the Conservation Division to find release sites on station.

Good intentions and dead animals

Over the years, Martin has learned that most people want to help, but many of them do far more harm than good.

"Most of the animals we get are not really orphans," she says. "They're kidnap victims."

A well-meaning person will see an animal infant in the wild away from its mother, she explains, and assume it is abandoned or orphaned. They snatch the critter up and deliver it to Martin or, worse yet, try to help it themselves.

Actually, mothers of many species will leave their young for hours at a time to forage for food, if there are no immediate threats. "Most mammals can go six to eight hours without food," she said.

The best policy is to leave the babies alone for at least a couple hours, she said, perhaps setting water nearby if they appear to need it. On station, people are encouraged to report found animals to the Conservation Division at 301-342-3670.

The biggest mistake most people make is to feed the babies they find. Often, they are killing the creatures without knowing it. Cow's milk and condensed milk, for example, are fatally indigestible to baby animals.

Handling wild animals without gloves is another dangerous error, particularly for raccoons and other species susceptible to rabies. Not only is it unwise for the human, it can be a death sentence for the animal.

"If someone touches that animal and is concerned they have been exposed, we have to take that animal to be destroyed and tested for rabies," Martin explains.

Raccoons also carry a type of roundworm fatal to humans; Martin gives worm treatments to her raccoons every two weeks until release.

There are plenty of ways for people to help her, however. Martin is seeking non-profit status, and can take donations of money, time, food and supplies. Valued household items include baby food and cereal, fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts and acorns, dry dog and cat food, tissues, paper towels, used linens and detergents. Also useful are lumber, chain link and wire fencing, large-diameter corrugated pipe, and children's outdoor toys. Finally, volunteers are often required for transporting animals to vets or rehab sites out of state.

The impacts on her time and bank balance are tremendous, and at times there is just no more room at the inn.

"Folks tend to get a little upset when you turn an animal away," she says, "but sometimes you just don't have the money."

Still, she usually finds a way. It's a demanding calling, but one she can't seem to let go of.

"I always say I'm going to cut back," she says, "but then you get another call"

To contact Martin, call 301-342-7643.