How Curious – What goes on at WildCare Oklahoma?

MUSIC: How Curious theme

SOUND OF BAT VOCALISING

Rachel Hopkin Script
Hi. This is Rachel Hopkin with KGOU's How Curious and the much-amplified sound we're hearing is that of an evening bat in distress because of the proximity of a perceived predator.

SOUND OF BAT VOCALISING

Will Funk
So he's vocalizing. This is a mechanism for him to keep telling me to get away, stop handling him, but I need to get his weight.

Rachel Hopkin Script
Will Funk is not, in fact, a bat predator but instead the Director of Wildlife Rehabilitation at Wildcare Oklahoma. The bat had been brought in the previous day having been found stranded on the ground.

Will Funk
These guys – some of them migrate down south for the winter, others spend the winter in Oklahoma undergoing what's called torpor. So torpor is a state of decreased activity, it's not quite hibernation. But because some of these guys don't leave the state, they will get downed, meaning they fall when they get cold initially if they're not in a proper location. They get found and they get brought to us in the winter.

Rachel Hopkin Script
At WildCare, the bat has been warmed up and Will is now going through a rather messy process of trying to feed it a meal worm. It's a slow and delicate task but some of the worm's guts have made it into the bat's mouth.

Will Funk
And then after I give him water, I do just groom him a little bit to make sure that no guts are on his fur, there's no matting. When these guys are in captivity a lot of times they'll stop grooming initially. Stress causes them to not want to perform natural behaviors - kinda like when we're depressed, we don't want to take cover care of ourselves, they go through a similar thing.

Rachel Hopkin Script
Will is confident that over time, the bat will adjust and destress until the season becomes warm enough for it to be released back to the wild. He's seen it happen many times before. This bat, he told me, is one of around 100 that WildCare has treated in the last year. In fact, the organization's dealt with nearly 10000 creatures of all different species in that same time frame. Inger Giuffrida is its executive director.

Inger Giuffrida
So Wild Care Oklahoma is a wildlife rehabilitation and conservation education center that's located in Noble, Oklahoma, but we serve the whole state. We take in injured, ill, and orphaned wildlife from throughout the state with the goal of providing them both medical care and rehabilitation so that they can be released back to their natural environments. But in addition to our rehabilitation work, we do a lot of education, in person direct education, over 100 events a year. We help people connect with wildlife and understand that they are sentient beings with full emotional, social lives that have basic needs just like humans. In addition, we operate a help desk and through that help desk, we're able to help people resolve conflicts that they're having with wildlife in a humane way. We also prevent them from bringing animals to us unnecessarily.

Rachel Hopkin Script
For example, not bringing in animals that have been temporarily left by their parents for fear that they've been orphaned. All of this is carried out by the nearly 20 employees of the non-profit, plus its fellows and scores of volunteers. Although WildCare receives no state or federal support and is largely funded by individual donations, it's a far cry today from how it began thanks to the vision of one woman, Rondi Large.

Rondi Large
You know, it was just like you would drive down the road and you see a lump on the side of the road and you realize it's an animal and it's not dead yet. And there's a lot of people like myself that would stop. And so you have a possum that's been hit by a car or a great horned owl with head trauma. What do you do with it? It's in your arms and that life is in the balance. But what do you do with a great horn that's trying to snap you but he's injured. And so that's when I just decided I was gonna try to be the answer and get training and do this.

Rachel Hopkin Script
That was back in 1984.

Rondi Large
It was out of the house for years. So the porch was triage and clinic and some housing of the animals and you know, then some of them led into the living room, and then it got too many for the living room and my husband's a tolerant man, but he does have limits. So we took over part of the garage and then we ended up taking over all three bays of the garage and started building outside enclosures and then it was more outside enclosures, and I kept dreaming of having an actual building So the facility building, getting that built in 2015 helped tremendously.

SEGUE

Inger Giuffrida
We have admissions of patients every single day of the year.

Rachel Hopkin Script
This is Inger Giuffrida again.

Inger Giuffrida
And every single one of those animals that comes through the door has to be evaluated medically, a care plan has to be established, sometimes surgery is needed. But within that, there is structure. So there are some animals that have to be fed five times a day, some that have be fed four, some three, some two, some one. There's medication. There's physical therapy that has to happen. And then in the bird room, some of those birds have to be fed every 15 minutes, every 30 minutes, every hour, depending again on where they are developmentally. So again, there's like this overarching schedule, but there's so much variability in it. And it is pretty incredible to see this team of primarily young people manage this extraordinarily complex operation. And I do want to say one other thing about my staff; the world of animal welfare, there are a lot of different jobs. You know, you can work at a zoo, you can work in a rescue, you can work at a sanctuary. In all of those examples, those people that work with directly with the animals have a relationship that they can build with those animals that they care for. The exception is wildlife rehab. We can't do that because if we do that, we diminish the chances of success for our patients in the wild.

Rachel Hopkin Script
Dr Mattie Yates is the staff vet at WildCare. She said the first thing she learnt in dealing with wild animals is not to talk to them.

Dr. Mattie Yates
We do that all the time with cats and dogs, right? “No, it's okay, you're gonna be okay.” Talking to wild animals does not comfort them. It stresses them out because we're predators, you know? So we have to be as quick and efficient as we can and it's better not to speak to them.
Rachel-in-situ
What other things do you do to kind of lessen the chances of them adapting to humans?
Dr Mattie Yates
It can be different for different species, but mostly it's interacting with them as little as possible. Some things like bobcats are more likely to get habituated to us because we bring them food and they associate us with food and safety So usually we try to cover our image, so we wear face coverings sometimes gowns and stuff to just like disguise our shape and then we put out food – like the last thing we do is we go in there and clean and do everything we need to and then put the food and leave immediately so that they're not associating us with bringing food. Other things like raptors or small mammals, we often cover their faces so we don't want them looking at us, we don't want them associating us with food and feeding and that kind of thing.

Rachel Hopkin Script
The WildCare staff will also use puppets with some species, such as baby raptors or birds of prey

Dr Mattie Yates
Baby raptors are another one that really imprint on humans and habituate to us. So when we're feeding, we have to hand feed them like their parents do, but we don't want them looking at our face. So we have puppets of what the parent looks like, and we'll feed them with that. So they associate that image with a parent or food rather than our faces.

SOUNDS OF SQUIRRELS

Rachel Hopkin Script
There are a number of squirrels currently at WildCare and they don't seem to be in danger of becoming habituated to humans. In fact, watching the staff try to get hold of them was one of the funnier recording opportunities I've had recently. Those things are fast.

SOUNDS OF SQUIRRELS

There were four of them that each needed a sulfur bath to help combat a case of ring worm - a fungal infection that affects skin and fur. They did all get treated in the end.

Squirrels are among the most common animals seen at WildCare. Top reasons for bringing animals in include cat and dog attacks, vehicle collision, yard work, being orphaned, being trapped in all manner of discarded material including litter and hunting or fishing gear, and being shot. Rondi Large, WildCare's founder, says that after having her hands on over 100 thousand animals, they've tended to blur somewhat. But certainly some of the humans bringing in the creatures have stuck in her mind.

Rondi Large
I had one lady that brought me – I don't even remember what it was – and she was kind of in a hurry dropping it off, and the entire time she was talking on her cell phone to someone. So she would answer my question and then she'd go, "No, the shoes in the bottom left of my closet." And then she'd talk to me a little bit and she goes, "No, you know, the luggage that I want is here and you gotta get it from there," so she obviously had someone at home packing for her but she seemed always very distracted. And finally when she was done, she said, "I am so sorry." She said, "I am supposed to be packing and catching a plane for my wedding. And this animal got injured and I just couldn't leave him. It was not the way to start a marriage." I just thought, what a phenomenal young lady to start her life by helping an animal in need. But you know, anyone that stops their lives – because we're all busy – to save another animal's life, I think is a very special individual.
Rachel-in-situ
That's a lovely way of looking at things. Have you ever had people bring in animals that they've harmed themselves?
Rondi Large
Yeah. Oh yeah. I had a gentleman that brought us three very young coyote pups and he admitted to us that he shot the parents and then found the pups and brought us the pups.
Rachel-in-situ
Oh.
Rondi Large
Oh, the stories are horrifying a lot of times. We had a gentleman that hit a barn owl and he brought him to us and he was not a happy camper about being there, and his attitude was not good. And then before he left he said, "Hold on, I have to call my wife." And he called his wife and then he said "here, talk to her" and she asked me who I was and where I was at and what I had and I told her and she said "good." She said, "I saw my husband hit him on the side of the road and he drove off. I was in the car behind him, and I made him bring him to you." I thought,

Well that's an interesting relationship. But yeah, a lot of people will harm animals deliberately or maybe unintentionally and then feel guilt for it.

Rachel Hopkin Script
Listening to Rondi's stories and hearing those of other members of the WildCare team gave me the impression that working there must be something of an emotional roll

Rondi Large
I love it when a volunteer is on vacation and they'll call me from Colorado going, "Rondi, I'm in the mountains of Colorado and I found an injured something. If I drive nonstop, I can get to you." And it's like, "let me check rehabbers in your area." Because, you know, love the commitment but …We had a gentleman call and he had found a baby skunk by himself and he had him in a box and he asked where we were and I told him Noble. And he said, "Okay, so what's the nearest airport?" Which was an interesting question. And I thought, it's like "there's one in Norman." And he goes, "Okay, I'll give you my ETA." And it's like okay, whatever. He had a private plane and he put this baby skunk in his private plane and he flew it to the Norman Airport so that I could get him from him.
Rachel-in-situ
You kinda see the best and worst of things here, don't you?
Rondi Large
Yeah. It's the extremes. It can be incredibly heart wrenching on a daily basis. But then when you get bummed out, what I would do is go on a release - when an animal's healthy enough to be released back out into the wild. So you get horribly down days and then all of a sudden you have a day and you have X number of animals, even if it's one life, and you get to drive him back to his home territory and open up the enclosure and let him have his life back. It's a phenomenal feeling.

Rachel Hopkin Script
Around 70% of the animals brought in to WildCare that make it through the first 24 hours get to be released. The back of their campus is full of pre-release enclosures which is the last stage in prepping the creatures to be returned to the wild. For those that can't be rehabilitated, there are sometimes hard choices to make. Here's Dr. Mattie Yates again.

Dr. Mattie Yates
We do have to euthanize animals and we do that almost every single day. We have to, and that's the best thing for them. I think of euthanasia as a treatment. We're relieving their suffering. Some people will say, "why do you even try?" or "why not just leave them there to die?" because that's natural. But then they're going to be out there for days, possibly, suffering, so it's better for us to take them and euthanize them if that's what needs to happen.

Rachel Hopkin Script
I wanted to end this episode on an upbeat, so I asked everyone I spoke with for their stories of animals who'd made it despite the odds. Unfortunately, time prevents me from including them all, but here's one from Rondi Large, the founder of WildCare.

Rondi Large

We had a little fawn come in that the leg had been mangled with hay equipment. And so it the choice was to take the leg or euthanize the little guy. And the vet at the time wanted to try to take the leg. Wasn't sure that that was the right thing that day that we made that decision. He was supposed to be bed-rested, no running around, no acting like a fawn. But you know it's a fawn. And he wanted me to keep him in a crate, and you know, this is a bottle baby too. So I opened up the door, like day two of this, so that I could get his bottle to him, and he bolted past me and started doing laps in the enclosure and jumping over things with the hind leg missing. And we did go ahead and release him with that group of fawn stature.

Rachel Hopkin Script
Thanks to Rondi and to all at WildCare who helped me with this episode, including those whose voices we didn't hear.

You can see photos of some of the creatures that WildCare has treated on this episode's webpage – search for KGOU and How Curious.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

As ever, if you have an idea for a future episode, we'd love to hear about it so please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.

Notes and Queries

Need permits from Wildlife Dept, US Fish and Wildlife service
Rondi was about 8 when she got first raccoon

Squirrels with ringworm brought in as babies so orphaned