Injured creatures have a friend on La. 93

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The Daily World

OPELOUSAS (AP) — If reincarnation is possible, Noel Thistlethwaite was an animal in a former life.

"I used to think I would have been a dog, but after I started diving, I thought maybe I would have been a fish," said Thistlethwaite, who lives off the beaten path of La. 93 between Grand Coteau and Arnaudville.

Whatever the reason, Thistlethwaite seems to have a way with all manner of creatures.

She shares the Acadian-style home she designed herself and its surrounding 10 acres with four dogs, two cats, one turkey, geese, chickens, a duck and one pigeon that just won't leave. And those are only the permanent residents.

In addition to the dogs she cares for in her Canine Country Club kennel, Thistlethwaite, a wildlife rescue volunteer, currently has four baby owls in an upstairs bedroom. They were saved by a woman in Iota whose boyfriend found them in a nest built in a rice dryer.

"(The rice farmer) wanted to kill them, but his girlfriend wouldn't let him," Thistlethwaite said. The woman took the baby birds to the Fisheries office, and the owls were transferred from there to Thistlethwaite's home, where she does her best to keep the birds on a natural feeding schedule and in an environment of semi-darkness.

Thistlethwaite also is caring for two young squirrels that have a snug nest in a tree protected by chicken wire. Three red-tail hawks live away from the house in a larger cage, awaiting the day they are strong enough to return to the lives they knew before being shot from the sky.

Although she is not caring for any right now, Thistlethwaite said her favorite creature to nurse back to health is a possum.

"They're just so interesting," Thistlethwaite said. "They are marsupial and nocturnal. They have 50 teeth, and they have on average 23 babies" — all of which can fit together in a teaspoon at birth, she said.

People erroneously think possums are dirty creatures, Thistlethwaite said.

"But possums are very disease-free. I tell people, these guys are good. They're the ones eating dead animals and cleaning up the diseases for the rest of us," she said.

Thistlethwaite cares for all of these animals 24 hours a day. Wildlife recovery is something she has been interested in for about 15 years. "But it's not how long that matters. It's how committed they are," Thistlethwaite said.

She builds her own wildlife cages and foots the bill for most of the materials. She also pays for food for the injured animals.

Some money for her wildlife rescue efforts comes from Wildlife in Distress Inc., a Lafayette-based wildlife rescue organization made up entirely of volunteers.

The organization, abbreviated WILD, works to secure funding, through grants and donations, for Thistlethwaite and the four other certified wildlife volunteers in Acadiana. Like Thistlethwaite, the other WILD volunteers bear the brunt of expenses related to caring for injured animals. Some area veterinarians volunteer time and donate medicine to the cause.

In addition to fund raising, WILD trains people to tend to injured wildlife and works to educate the public on how to handle and find help for such animals. Spring is WILD's busiest season, Thistlethwaite said, because of the abundance of newborns.

Well-meaning people can do more harm than good by trying to care for a wild animal themselves, Thistlethwaite said. People should not rescue a baby bird or animal right away, unless there are dogs, cats or other predators near, because parents may come back to claim it, she said.

It's best to keep an eye on the animal or bird for a while before picking it up, Thistlethwaite said. If a nest is near the ground, put the baby bird back in it. Contrary to popular belief, an animal or bird will not reject its offspring just because a person has touched it, she said.

Do pick up an animal or bird that is weak, cold, sick or injured, Thistlethwaite said. "Put it in a box with an old T-shirt, keep it warm and quiet and bring it to an animal hospital, she said.

Noel Thistlethwaite holds a red-tailed hawk in Opelousas recently. The hawk, which was shot in the wing, has fluffy white feathers where a pin was placed to reconstruct the wing.