Wild things find haven, healing

Story by Gina Howard | Photos by P.C. Piazza

Last year, Wildlife in Distress helped 82 injured or orphaned raccoons make it back into the wild. And although that sounds like a lot of critters, it still doesn't include the hundreds of squirrels, opossums, birds, beavers and other animals they have also helped over the past 10 years.

Dee Schaal is the mammal coordinator for Wildlife in Distress, Inc., a non-profit organization in Lafayette that saves injured or orphaned wildlife, then sets them free.

Schaal said there is one main reason they take the time and money to do this.

“Because there is a need,” she said. “Once people know you do something like this, they end up dropping animals off on your doorstep.”

The animals are kept in the homes and backyards of the group’s 20 or so volunteers.

Gina Stanton, the director of Wildlife in Distress, Inc., and has the most complete animal facilities of the volunteers.

In Stanton’s backyard, there are several cages, which are currently housing numerous animals, including a fox recovering from four broken legs, two beavers that were taken from their home by an unthinking fisherman, an egret, several baby opossums, a turkey vulture she calls Killer and a couple of great horned owls.

What’s the strangest animal Wildlife in Distress has rescued? A mountain lion, Schaal said.

But strangest doesn’t mean favorite to her.

The first wildlife she ever saved has become her favorite animal.

“When I started this, the first animal I raised was a possum,” she said. “I raised him all by myself and I got very attached.”

But after 10 years of getting to know an animal then having to set it free, Schaal said she has learned how to deal with it better.

“You know there are always more animals coming in and you just realize they have to go,” she said.

And by the time it is time for some of the animals to leave, she is ready for them to go.

In particular, the raccoons, which Schaal said can be quite a handful: “They’re like teenagers sometimes you are so glad when they leave.”

Some of the more interesting wild animals staying with Stanton now are a pair of young beavers, named Betty and Bucky Beaver.

As Stanton makes her daily rounds in her backyard cages, Betty is especially friendly, following her around like a puppy.

For now, the beavers can be handled and seem almost domesticated, but once time to set them free nears, Stanton will cut off all human contact so they will be ready to survive in the wild.

The people with Wildlife in Distress are trained to deal with these animals.

Schaal warns that just because the animal looks cute, it can still be dangerous. Take the raccoon, for example.

“There were some raccoons I raised since they were five weeks old. They thought I was their mother, but they are still wild animals,” she said.

A squirrel has jaws strong enough to crack a nut. Just imagine what they could do to a finger.

She said the thing to remember is to be careful around these animals.

And be sure the animal needs saving before you go through the trouble.

“We get a lot of rabbits that aren’t babies, they are just small,” Schaal said. “People will say ‘I had a hard time catching him.’ If you had a hard time catching it, then it is probably fine.”

Wildlife in Distress is not funded by any governmental agencies and relies solely on the few private donations it receives and money from fund-raisers.

“We don’t get a lot of donations. We get a lot of birds, but not many donations,” Stanton said.

And taking care of all of these animals is expensive. Many of them have to have special food and some need medical attention. Luckily, several veterinarians donate their services.

Stanton said she doesn’t like to tell people where they are located because she doesn’t want a bunch of abandoned animals on her front porch.

But anyone who would like to make a donation, suggest a fund-raiser, or needs information can call 222-0121.