

Helping rehab wild animals – a joy and honor

By Deborah Thompson

I have been an animal lover all my life. I have always had pets and love wildlife. When my husband and I moved to the North Shore a few years ago, we did so for the environment and activities.

In the Lake Tahoe Basin I feel in my element and am often blessed with wildlife sightings, be it lake, land or air. It was only a matter of time before I became aware of Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care, and the fact that I had just missed their scheduled open house to the public. I literally put on my calendar to check the website the following spring for the next scheduled open house so that I would not miss it.

I immediately signed up to participate in the adventures to come.



The training

The training was two full days over a weekend in May. When I arrived the first day, I was impressed with how organized the setup was, how friendly the folks were and the baby birds in the back of the room. As we took seats, Cheryl began her lecture with Tom working the video for visual on the overhead screen. I noticed these were folks who enjoyed what they were doing and were ready to educate and welcome us in.

My attention was locked from the start.

Cheryl lectured from both experience and the heart. She spoke of how she started in wildlife rehabilitation and described a person with interests that were not far from my own. She exhibited such knowledge depth and passion that I felt encouragement and excitement about my decision to attend. Through the day I learned about LTWC's mission, how to care for the tiny wildlife, regulations around the larger wildlife, how to create a "bird-purse" to carry hatchlings in for the frequent feedings, and how to make mush-mouse. I was hooked.

The second day was on site at the wildlife center. With the various sessions on rabbits, ducks and procedure on wildlife pick up and transportation, I began to understand that I might get more wildlife volunteer opportunities than I thought possible. Everyone I spoke to assured me that, as a trainee, I'd get out of it what I put into it. Any size commitment was mine to give and no size was too small.

I was afraid of mistakes.

The trainers talked of their own mistakes. It was clear that from both mistakes and successes came knowledge depth. The sign-up sheets went around and my name went on them. I signed up for assisting with fundraising booths at local events, I signed up for on-call transportation out of North Shore. I signed up for cleaning shifts at the center. Eagle flight exercise training.

The experience

Two days later I attended the orientation. That was the first step before I could start shifts. This one was hard as there was a not so healthy resident in a cage in the room where part of the orientation was held. Normally this sight would distress me, but what I learned in the previous week was that the center was the right place for this creature to be, and that we were there to help. I already felt part of a team and

that I could get past the hard parts, as the good parts outweigh them.

The orientation session was filled with many process details that, as I look back, are now second nature to me. They walked us through the basics from training, how to log our hours and closed the orientation by simply cutting us loose to sign up for shifts.

I did, but was disappointed to find that the first available shift at the center was a week out. No worries, it was great to see folks eager to help. Although my first center shift was a week away, I was also signed up to work the bike race booth that next weekend. So my experience began right away.

Here is some of what I experienced in my first year:

1. Fundraising booth volunteering – Here I learned how much the community appreciates LTWC and all it stands for. I met board members and other volunteers who share the same passion and had great stories to share. I learned of the Kokanee festival – a wonderful treasure right in my back yard.

2. Many, many evening shifts at the wildlife center. While any number of shifts is appreciated, I got so hooked on what I was learning and participating in each time, that I averaged two, sometimes three shifts a week.

a. I cleaned bear cages and learned how to corral wide-eyed cubs from one den to the other for a dinner of fish and fruit.

b. I cleaned bobcat cages and fed bobcats, not once getting grossed out by what they eat.

c. I cleaned raccoon cages, while they washed their marshmallows in their pool and stared at my every move.

d. I helped teach a river otter to swim and be happy again. She was then transferred to another facility with a lone

otter in need of a buddy. She, in turn, taught him to swim.

e. I fed a bat, and wanted to tickle his little head as he was so cute in his own way, but Cheryl said no.

f. I fed swallows mealworm "toothpaste". Probably not as fresh tasting as it sounds, but a very interesting feeding technique.

g. I held a cottontail rabbit and bottle fed it until it fell asleep on my lap.

h. I hand fed stellar jays in the aviary while their buddies swooped my head to get in line for their turn.

i. I watched and assisted Cheryl in a Canada goose wing repair.

j. I observed up close, with instruction, a feeding of a Saw-whet owl mush-mouse. With a frightened and stubborn owl, feeding can be a negotiation process and Cheryl has the skills for success.

k. I bottle fed baby raccoons that like to hold your hair until you put them down. This is cute until they are bigger.

l. With hands-on training from Tom and Cheryl, I tube-fed a red-tailed hawk that refused to eat.

m. I learned a bit about the center's on-site policy and procedures, helped organize equipment and was entrusted to come back at the end of the season and help winterize the property.

3. Eagle flight exercise – I held a golden eagle in my arms and tossed it for flight to help exercise its wings. I did the same for a bald eagle. There are no words for this so I will leave it at that.

The joy and honor

If the list above doesn't illustrate the joy in experience while volunteering at Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care, let me summarize in closing with a story about a house guest I was honored to have. In October after the snow season started, a call came into the wildlife center from my neighborhood on the North Shore. A red tailed hawk had hit a window and was down, but alive. Cheryl called me in for action. I went to the house. With my knowledge that I had gained in the past four months, I was able to handle the hawk, assess its condition and report back to Cheryl my findings. She had determined the hawk simply needed a quiet dark place to rest, as it could not be left out if it was not ready to fly, and shake off its dizzy spell.

The roads were wet so I agreed to secure the hawk at my house. It was then when Cheryl stated to me, "You now have the hawk in your possession on behalf of Lake Tahoe Wildlife for care and recovery." A chill of went up my spine. I felt privileged.

I felt knowledge in something I respect. I felt confident because of the experiences and training I had received so far. The next morning, with Cheryl's coaching over the phone, I was able to assess if the hawk could fly adequately, and it was sent flying out my garage and high over my neighbor's house. There was that chill again. Joy and honor.

For anyone who loves wildlife, appreciates the advocacy behind LTWC's mission, but is not sure if, or how, to get involved, I invite you to contact the center and talk to any of the volunteers, board members or the Millhams directly. Then, register for training and simply begin.

Deborah Thompson lives in Incline Village and has been an active volunteer with Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care since May 2012.

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Note:

LTWC's next training is May 18-19. More info is online.