

ANIMAL E.R.

When animals are injured or orphaned, wildlife rehabilitators step in. Their goal: Let the wild be free.

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The race is on at Lakeside Nature Center in Kansas City, Missouri. Just outside the center, tucked into a clearing in the city's sprawling Swope Park, a great bronze hare is poised to take a mighty leap, just like his cousin in Aesop's fable. But this hare isn't headed toward a finish line. He's headed back to life in the wild.

Inside the nature center, as in the old story, the race is going not to the swift, but to the steady. The staff is taking care of injured and rescued wild animals, teaching schoolchildren about wildlife and conservation, and opening visitors' eyes to the wonders of the nature that surrounds us, even in the city.

Hawks, woodpeckers, turtles, opossums, raccoons, snakes, squirrels, and many other kinds of wildlife

ABOVE: Baby raccoons need to be fed up to four times a day. **LEFT:** This Barred Owl is one of Lakeside Nature Center's education animals; he was undernourished and had a cataract when he came to the nature center in 1995. **OPPOSITE:** A baby squirrel eagerly eats his breakfast from a syringe.



make their homes in town. At Lakeside, visitors of all ages have a chance to get close to some of the more elusive species that rustle in treetops, hide behind garages, and nibble hostas at night. They always leave with more respect for nature and its creatures.

Susan Bray, senior naturalist at the center, has been interested in nature all her life. But many children who visit the center have never even taken a walk in the woods, she says. When she takes kids for a hike along a park trail, they forget about video games for a while and let their imaginations flit with a butterfly or leap with a squirrel from one branch to another.

LEFT AND OPPOSITE: Naturalist Susan Bray holds an American Kestrel, the most common falcon in the United States. Found by the side of a highway in 2002, this bird never fully healed from a dislocated shoulder. **BELOW:** A pond behind the center is a good place to view birds and aquatic wildlife.



How to find a wildlife rehabilitator

Rehabilitating wild animals is a job that requires patience, training, licenses, and permits. Naturalists at Lakeside Nature Center in Kansas City, Missouri, rehabilitate some animals at the center, but they also work with about 20 trained volunteers in the community who take on the challenge and responsibility of nursing injured or orphaned animals back to health in their own homes. The National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (nrawildlife.org) and the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (iwrc-online.org) raise awareness of the work of rehabilitators; both organizations can provide more information about the work of rehabilitation and help you find resources in your community.





“Children have a natural curiosity,” Bray says. Kids sit rapt when a naturalist introduces them to a magnificent hawk or a pensive owl; they’re fascinated to learn that snakes’ flicking, forked tongues actually smell the world. And they’re charmed to see baby opossums hitching a ride on their mother’s back.

The center’s Junior Keepers program, for volunteers between the ages of 10 and 18, gives kids a healthy outlet for their inquisitiveness, teaches them about conservation, and lets them lend a hand. It’s not a glamorous job. Junior Keepers change the litter box in the rabbits’ pen, take a mop and bucket to the opossums’ enclosure, and help the center’s naturalists feed the education animals—critters that for one reason or another cannot be returned to the wild. Junior Keepers sometimes help out when rehabilitated animals are released.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: School-age volunteers Emily, Madeline, Kyra, Jordan, and Taylor are Junior Keepers at the center. On this day, they tend to a family of abandoned baby opossums, which are almost old enough to be released. **RIGHT:** Jordan chops vegetables to feed resident animals.





When should you intervene?

When birds, squirrels, rabbits, and other city wildlife are raising their young, people often find tiny animals in their gardens and aren't sure what to do. Usually it's best to do nothing. "Wildlife parents do not abandon their babies," wildlife rehabilitator Sharon Goff says. "People should wait before they rush to rescue. We want the moms to raise their babies, but if there are problems, we are here to help." These bunnies, left, were rescued from a busy highway median. Lakeside Nature Center naturalists offer this advice:



- If you find a rabbit's nest, leave the babies alone. The mother feeds her young twice a day; she'll probably return.
- If a nestling (a very young bird) has fallen from its nest, pick it up and carefully place it back in the nest.
- Watch fledgling birds (young birds that have left the nest but might not yet be able to fly) from a window. If the parents don't return with food within an hour or two, place the fledglings in the nearest shrub or tree.
- If you find an injured or orphaned animal, call a local wildlife rehabilitator for advice. (Search "wildlife rehabilitation" and the name of your state on the Internet.) Do not try to feed the animal; put it in a box and take it to an expert.
- Do not try to care for a wild animal on your own or make a pet of a wild animal. It is illegal, and it's not safe.

More than 2,000 injured or orphaned animals are brought to the center every year, says Sharon Goff, a trained wildlife rehabilitator who has volunteered there for almost 30 years. About a dozen adult volunteers help raise and rehabilitate animals in their own homes, working closely with the staff.

Spring is the busy season. Baby birds fledge, rabbits nest, and the population of squirrels explodes. The staff never know what to expect when they come to work. They have checked in Great Horned Owls and Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds. Injured bats, box turtles, and even beavers are brought in for urgent care and rehabilitation.

The animals might be cuddly, and they are certainly vulnerable, but "we're not bunny huggers," Goff says of the center's staff and volunteers. Their goal is to return wild animals to the wild, not to make pets of them. Goff has raised or rehabilitated coyotes, foxes, flying squirrels, and more raccoons than she can count. Not all the animals survive, but those that can be returned to health are released in an appropriate natural setting.

Nurturing a tiny hummingbird or a baby squirrel is a privilege, Bray says. The relationships among

humans, animals, and their natural environments are complex, she reminds visitors. The center works hard to help children and adults recognize the importance of preserving natural habitats and respect the dignity and independence of wild animals, even if they would love to snuggle them like kittens.

Baby animals, especially, are charming. But the real pleasure, Bray says, is "seeing an animal go free—that is exhilarating." Every release is special. As the hare prepares to bound off to the life he was meant to live, it's clear that in this race, everyone wins. 🌿

See Buyer's Guide on page 110.

Behind the Scenes!



This baby Barred Owl, main photo, was nursed back to health and released. Naturalist Ruth Van Wye, wearing a pillowcase with eyeholes so the owl will not learn to rely on humans for food, holds the owl for photographer Marty Baldwin, left, who also has to conceal his face.

Be a Friend

Lakeside Nature Center is owned and managed by Kansas City's Parks and Recreation Department. Its success depends on volunteers and financial contributions. Monetary donations are used for food, medicine, and updating cages and exhibits. You can help by contacting Lakeside Nature Center, 4701 E. Gregory Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64132; 816/513-8960; lakesidenaturecenter.org.