



Glenn Houghton/The Age Dispatch

RECUPERATING: Brian Salt of the Salthaven wildlife rehabilitation centre near Mt. Brydges holds Nahanni, a kestrel hawk that came to Salthaven as a chick. Her recovery has been longer than most birds that come to the centre. After a year she still has some problems with her feathers and is receiving vitamin therapy in the hope that she will one day be strong enough to return to the wild.

Wildlife rescue service prepares for busy spring

by Glenn Houghton
The Age Dispatch

Things are about to get busy at Salthaven.

Spring is when things really start to happen at the wildlife rescue facility located just west of Mt. Brydges. Winter is a relatively quiet time at Salthaven, but when spring arrives wildlife becomes more active. Animals come out of hibernation, birds migrate home, and everybody starts having babies. Inevitably, accidents happen, but Salthaven is there to help.

"We take in sick, injured, or orphaned wildlife and fix them up, and get them back into the wild as quickly as possible," said Brian Salt, the former professional musician who started Salthaven 20 years ago.

"We do everything from baby sparrows to deer," he said. "You never know

what you're going to get."

Every life is valuable at Salthaven. Pigeons get the same dedicated level of care as hawks and owls. Their willingness to accept any sort of creature makes for a hectic schedule in the spring and summer, he said:

"In the busy part of our season we get about 30 calls a day, but we're only able to handle about 10 percent of those calls."

The calls come from everyone, including police, humane societies, animal care and control agencies, government agencies and the general public. Salthaven was able to help over 400 injured or orphaned birds and animals last year.

This year Salthaven will have close to 60 volunteers, up from just over 40 last year, to try to increase the number of

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WAITING FOR SPRING: Brian Salt of Salthaven coaxes a sleepy groundhog from its temporary housing. The groundhog's recuperation is nearly complete and once warmer spring weather arrives it will be released back into the wild.

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birds and animals it can help. More volunteers are always needed, said Brian.

Salthaven has grown significantly over the past two decades. "It started out as kind of a backyard operation," said Brian.

As a longtime animal lover, he said he wanted to be a veterinarian when he was young, but his success as a professional drummer took him down a different path. The call to help nature's less fortunate creatures kept coming back, however.

"My kids would bring things in," he said. "I guess they figured Dad could fix anything."

Finding great satisfaction in helping wildlife, Brian sought formal training to be able to do a better job of it. He's now certified by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC) and the Ontario Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Network (OWREN) in rehabilitation training skills and advanced clinical pathology. This allows him to perform minor surgery and to recognize and diagnose problems in birds and animals.

Over the years, as he took in more and more animals, Brian found the need to expand Salthaven.

On an organizational level, Salthaven now has a board of directors and is incorporated and able to issue tax receipts for donations, which are always urgently needed.

For the practical aspects of its work, its current location on a 100-acre farm at the western edge of Mt. Brydges, has one main building that serves as the hospital, as well as holding pens for everything from ducks to deer. There's even a pond to help water fowl recuperate and learn to fly again.

Animals are kept separated as much as possible, to avoid spreading infections and to keep predators from glaring at creatures that would normally be their prey. The basement of Brian's house often serves as a secondary hospital facility.

Salthaven's volunteers try to get their patients fixed up and back into the wild as quickly as possible, before they get too used to humans and become dependent. "Our whole effort is to maintain the wild in wildlife," said Brian.

"We've had some birds stay with us for up to a year, but normally it's not that long," he said. A stay of a few weeks is much more typical.

Returning an animal to nature is a triumph, he said, but it can still be hard to watch a patient go. "I have to force myself not to get too attached."

In addition to hands-on work with the birds and animals, Brian spends many hours, particularly during the quieter winter months, talking to people about wildlife.

"Public education is a big part of what we do," he said. "We focus on the environment and how wildlife is a barometer of what's happening in the environment."

Some people are more accepting of that mes-

sage than others, he said. It can often be difficult to explain to people living and working in an agricultural area why it's important to save injured groundhogs or possums.

"Everything in nature is a farmer's enemy," he laughs.

We all share the same ecosystem, though, he said, and ultimately we're a part of nature. We have a responsibility to nature, both for the sake of wildlife and for ourselves.

"Wildlife acts as a canary in the coal mine," he said, referring to the practice by which the sensitive birds were used by miners to provide early warning of dangerous gasses in the mine.

From a purely practical perspective, while farmers often feel at odds with nature, in many cases nature and wildlife can be the farmer's friend. "Hawks keep down rodents," he said, as one example.

"Groundhogs are every farmer's bane, but they actually help aerate the soil, and help with drainage," he explained. "And they also eat insects."

The vast majority of people he talks to see the good in helping wildlife, said Brian. Many need help, however, to be able to do good rather than well-intentioned harm.

"We explain to people how to know if a baby bird or a fawn really needs help," he said.

Many of the "orphans" that show up at Salthaven haven't really been abandoned by their mothers, he said. "A lot of times they're abducted, not rescued."

For example, mother deer will often distance themselves from their fawns to avoid having their scent bring predators to their offspring, explained Brian. The mother will return after several hours to check on her young, but during that time someone might think the fawn is an orphan and decide to try to save it. "These are people with a lot of compassion and they're trying to do the right thing."

Unfortunately, the fawn can become injured in the capture, or sick from being fed cow's milk, said Brian. That's usually when the animal's rescuers become overwhelmed and call Salthaven, he said.

While he said he hopes to decrease the number of unnecessary rescues, Brian said he doesn't want to discourage the desire to help.

"Compassion is a good thing to foster in any community."

The displays of caring and decency he has witnessed through his involvement with Salthaven have been remarkable, said Brian.

"We've had bikers show up with fox pups wrapped in their shirts," he said. The welts on their skin from the bugs hitting them as they rode shirtless were a strong testimony to their compassion, he added.

"There's inherent good in everyone," he said. "It just needs to be brought out."

For more information, visit Salthaven's website at www.salthaven.org.

Returning animals to the wild is the goal of Salthaven rescue facility