



◀ **Top Stories**

-  **'Melrose Place' actress's trial begins**
-  **3 H.S. teachers accused of sex with students**
-  **Fatal truck crash triggers Turnpike traffic mess**

Home > [Hunterdon County Democrat](#) > [County news](#)

## N.J. wildlife refuge gives injured, orphaned animals a second chance

Published: Tuesday, August 14, 2012, 9:24 AM Updated: Thursday, August 23, 2012, 4:33 PM

 **By Cristina Rojas/Hunterdon County Democrat**  
Follow

Comment Tweet Share  
Email Print

**ALEXANDRIA** — Set back from the road away from neighbors and passers-by is an 11-acre wildlife refuge.

On a recent morning, several raccoons playfully jumped over one another in a cage next to opossums. In a room next door, a black bear cub recovering from surgery sat in a cage to herself. She rattled the bars, growling, as the executive director tried to open the door to the cage.

Tracy Leaver, along with two staffers and an army of more than 40 volunteers, operates the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, a nonprofit animal rehabilitation center that is dedicated to the care and release of orphaned and injured wildlife.

The refuge takes in about 800 animals each year and has as many as 120 in its care at one time, providing a temporary home to bears, squirrels, foxes, raccoons, opossums, otters, woodchucks, minks, turtles, porcupines, bats, coyotes, rabbits and bobcats until they grow up or return to full health.

"Our job here is to simply give the animals a second chance," Leaver said.

Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, which receives no state or federal funding, relies on donations to operate. It started 26 years ago when Leaver found two orphaned raccoons, and it grew from there.

The refuge, which works closely with the state Division of Fish and Wildlife's black bear project team, is the only one in the state that is permitted to take in bears, in part because the demand is low.

Over the years, the refuge has cared for 72 bears, mostly abandoned or injured cubs.

Returning the animals to the wild is a long process, Leaver said.

Some infant animals spend time in an incubator before moving to a terrarium tank, kennel carrier or larger cage, and then a pre-release cage outside, where they can adapt to their natural environment.

"When they're in as infants ... we have to tube feed or bottle feed," Leaver said. "But as they progress, all that human interaction is removed as much as possible. We're providing food and that's it."

It's a process that's in tune with the animal's natural timing, she said.

"If it's a squirrel and it's usually weaned in the wild at 6 to 8 weeks, it's weaned here at 6 to 8 weeks," she said. "If it's usually at an age of independence at 12 to 14 weeks, we make sure that animal is released at that normal age of independence."

Rabbits come and go in a matter of weeks, but bears stay until they are 18 months old.



Enlarge Cristina Rojas/Hunterdon County Democrat

Woodlands Wildlife Refuge gives animals second chance gallery (18 photos)





**Bear cubs being raised at Woodlands Wildlife Refuge**  
Woodlands Wildlife Refuge is dedicated to the care and release of orphaned and injured wildlife.  
[Watch video](#)

"When we're satisfied that they're showing all of the natural capabilities to be the wild animal that they are, then we release them," she said. "We're not releasing cute little teddy bears. We're releasing bears back out that want to have nothing to do with people."

The animals are released back into the wild, in areas near their homes, she added.

The staff and volunteers mimic the animals' natural diets and eating habits

as best they can, Leaver said.

Bears are the biggest animals, eating 10 pounds of dry dog food and fruit and vegetables a day when they are 8 months and 15 pounds when they are 18 months.

"Their job in the wild is to pack on an incredible amount of food so they can go into their hibernation in the winter," she said. "We have to do for them what they're going to do for themselves in the wild."

In the late fall and winter months, the refuge replaces the fruit and vegetables with nuts and woodier plant sources.

The refuge is currently home to five cubs. Freedom, the quarantined cub, was found lying on the side of a road in mid-July after she was hit by a car. She suffered a slight concussion and fractured her front leg, but is now on the mend, itching to climb and run. After she is given the go-ahead from the veterinarian, she will move to a larger enclosure outside to begin building up strength in her leg.



Photo courtesy of Woodlands Wildlife Refuge  
Freedom, a 7-month-old cub with a fractured front leg, days before her surgery.

The four other cubs, three of which are siblings, arrived in early April over Easter weekend. The three cubs, aptly named Easter, Passover and Risen, were abandoned by their mother, whose den was disturbed by people.

"She cut her losses," Leaver said. "Whoever followed her followed her and whoever didn't got left behind."

The fourth cub, which was given the name "Jean" by residents in the area, is also an orphan. People, despite pleas from police and wildlife officials, did not leave the area alone. The mother retrieved one cub during the night, but not Jean.

"If there's a cub that's alone or a bear that's in the area, people really need to leave it alone and give that family a chance to be reunited," Leaver said. "It's not going to happen unless the area is left alone. ... When it doesn't

work out, they come here."

The refuge is a revolving door, with animals coming and going.

"It's the hard part, bittersweet part, but it's also the magical part of what we do," she said of releasing the animals into the wild. "It's up to them. We've done everything we can to give them every good opportunity to go out there and be a well-functioning wild animal."

The refuge can be reached at [woodlandswildlife.org](http://woodlandswildlife.org) or P.O. Box 5046, Clinton, N.J. 08809.