

Hunterdon organization marks 25 years of work to rehabilitate injured animals

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Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, a nonprofit animal rehabilitation group currently based in Alexandria Township, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this fall. Here founder Tracy Leaver is shown with a rescued bear cub. / courtesy of Tracy Leaver

When she was growing up in the borough of Hampton, Tracy Leaver spent a lot of time with animals. She enjoyed the wildlife that lived practically in her backyard, and she would occasionally take care of stray critters.

For nearly 20 years she worked in the orthodontics field, including five years owning and managing an orthodontics laboratory in Bethlehem Township. But she never completely abandoned her fondness for animals.

So her life went full circle when in 1986 she founded Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, a nonprofit animal rehabilitation group currently based in Alexandria Township. She used the money she saved working in orthodontics to create the registered nonprofit organization.

“I started this as a side project,” Leaver said. “But once I stepped through that door, that was it. This was the path that unfolded before me.”

thousands of animals — bears, squirrels, rabbits, bobcats, foxes, raccoons, skunks, opossums, beavers, turtles, snakes, and others — and releasing them back into the wild. She estimates that her refuge cares for about 800 animals a year.

It’s been her full-time occupation — and — passion for the past quarter of a century. The end of 2011 allows Leaver to look back on 25 years of tending to

“It’s been happy, it’s been sad, it’s been bittersweet,” said Leaver, who now lives in the Pittstown section of Alexandria. “The animals come to us because of some interaction with humans. The fact that we have been able to give so many animals a second chance to live is amazing.”

. Here some fox infants rescued by the organization. / courtesy of Tracy Leaver



Woodlands has a facility in Pittstown, including a bear enclosure. While it sometimes refers animals to other facilities, it's most often on the receiving end, Leaver said. Animals are brought to her by veterinarians or other animal rehabilitation centers, but she said most come from residents who encounter animals in distress and want to help.

Leaver says the refuge's 25th year is an unusual benchmark. "The average life of animal rehab groups is about three years," she said. "For us to be here after 25

years is a reason to celebrate."

She is the organization's only employee and said that Woodlands Wildlife Refuge operates strictly on donations. "We receive no local, no state, no federal funding," she said.

She added that the group's limited budget continues to be buffeted by the tough financial times.

"Our workload keeps increasing — the animals don't give a damn about finances," she said, "but our funding since the recession has not."

She does this work with the aid of volunteers. She estimates the "busy" season — March through October — brings an average of 50 volunteers. For the rest of the year, she gets about 15 people, she said.

Its most recent fundraiser is a children's picture book called "Broke Leg Bear," written by Loren Spiotta-DiMare of Tewksbury and illustrated by Key Wilde of Pittstown.

The book is based on the story of a black bear cub that had been struck by a car. Leaver's organization rehabilitated that cub, with help from veterinarians in Red Bank who performed needed surgery, and released the animal after 13 months.

"That was in 2007, when we received 10 bear cubs in a two-week period," Leaver recalled. "It was really hard. We had only handled one or two at a time until then. But word was spread, and we received enough donations that we could handle them all."

Another milestone was the first bobcat that came to Woodlands in 1997, according to Leaver. "He was so incredibly broken," she said. "But through the generosity of veterinarians and volunteers working hard, we were able to release him after six months. That was one of those moments that change you."

Leaver credits the longevity of the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge to the board of directors and the team of volunteers who actually tend to the animals.

Mary Genco of the Annandale section of Clinton Township is one such volunteer. In 2009, she and her daughter Maddie, then a junior at North Hunterdon High School, started working at Woodlands after learning about the group through the school.

“When I moved to New Jersey (from Ohio), I couldn’t believe how much wildlife is in our backyard,” Mary Genco said. “I’m glad to be part of Woodlands because we’re able to make a difference to the animals.”

That point was brought home dramatically this past August in the wake of Hurricane Irene, Genco added. “Three or four days after the hurricane came through, we had over 100 animals come in to us. I don’t know if people are aware of how a storm affects wildlife.”

Genco said that volunteering at Woodlands involves considerable training, which includes shadowing more experienced workers.

“Tracy does a great job of educating people,” Genco said. “She makes people aware of who we are and what we do.”

Deborah Weyman of Union Township agrees that education is a major part of the Woodlands mission. Weyman has known Leaver since 1978 and has served on the board of directors at Woodlands in various capacities since it was founded.

“We receive many animals because people went out of their way to bring them to us,” Weyman said. “That says a lot about people’s feelings toward wildlife.

“When people hear our name, they may think we’re a place where animals live permanently. We’re more of a hospital or a nursery. Our goal is to put these animals back in the wild,” Weyman said.

The rehabilitation process varies according to the species.

A rabbit may need only two or three weeks at the refuge, while a bear may have to stay for as long as a year.

“I’m pretty tenacious about sticking around,” Leaver said. “We’ve been able to do a lot. Our goal is to do more.”

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, to purchase the book “Broke Leg Bear” or to make a donation, visit www.woodlandswildlife.org or write to Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 5046, Clinton, NJ 08809. To learn more about animal rehabilitation, go to www.njawr.com, the Web site for the New Jersey Association of Wildlife Rehabilitators.