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Slidell northshore's guide MAGAZINE

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Animals find second chance with South East Wildlife Rescue

By: Joy E. Rancatore

If you've ever come into your kitchen in the morning to find your bulldog, a raccoon and a baby otter lined up and waiting patiently for their breakfast, you might be a wildlife rehabilitator. If you have an otter making laps in your swimming pool, you might be a wildlife rehabilitator. And, if you're up all hours of the night, feeding injured or orphaned critters; never know what the next phone call might bring; and receive no pay for your 24/7 job, you're definitely a wildlife rehabilitator!

Michelle and Charles Carollo opened their hearts and home to injured and orphaned wildlife in 2007 when they founded the South East Wildlife Rescue. Their first introduction to the needs of area wildlife and need for more rehabilitators came when someone found two orphaned squirrel babies across from Slidell Memorial Hospital, where Michelle works as Director of Women and Children's Services.

She agreed to find help for them; and, when all area "rehabbers" were full at the time, she and Charles did their research and relied on their medical backgrounds



(she's a neonatal nurse, and he's an emergency room nurse) to coax the squirrels back to health.

"I thought I can't just let these little guys die," Michelle said.

Once those squirrels were released, Michelle realized her new calling and became an internationally licensed wildlife rehabilitator. They now have other wildlife rehabilitators throughout the state who work in conjunction with them. This enables them to get animals in need the best care possible.

"A lot of our animals are orphaned or injured. We use them for educational purposes, to teach the community about what to do when you do find an orphaned or injured animal. A lot of people think they can become pets; and they're not. They do not make very good pets at all," she said. "Our animals have minimal human contact for us to be able to release them back into their normal environment, and that's the sole purpose of what our organization is about."

The Rescue receives 10-15 calls a day primarily about squirrels, raccoons, wild rabbits, foxes, opossums, wild pigs and other similar animals; as Michelle says, "On any given day, you never know what's going to be here!" A couple months ago, they heard from the owners of a marina in Grand Isle who had found a two-week-old orphaned river otter kit. Clairese—as she became known—was caked in mud, hadn't eaten in 24 hours and still had her eyes closed. Well, her eyes are open now! She's sleek and soft and into EVERYTHING!

Michelle said they had to teach her everything her mother would have taught her, including how to swim. She had her first lessons in the Carollo's bathtub and then graduated to a baby pool and now, the big pool. Her next lesson will be how to fish. Now that Clairese is doing well with ground meat, they will soon introduce her to live fish.



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Clairese enjoyed showing off her swimming skills for us when we met her and we watched as she meticulously dried herself off on a towel when she got out of the pool. Watching the brownish-gray imp rubbing herself all along the towel and ground had us all laughing. She's quite the little entertainer!



"I can't NOT help these little guys. It does get very taxing and very expensive, but there always seems to be a way—God provides us with that opportunity: somebody comes up with some sort of funding or we'll get a big donation of fruit or something," Michelle said.

River otters, like Clairese, weigh 20-30 pounds when full grown and can live up to 25 years in captivity, as opposed to 6-8 years in the wild. Most animals are released back into the wild, but that's not always possible. Once she gets to be six months to a year old, Clairese will most likely travel to San Diego, Calif., to live at Sea World.

Caring for these animals is quite expensive with all the food, housing, shots and vet bills. Since these rehabilitators receive no government funding and are responsible for the costs themselves, they welcome donations. The Rescue can always use more formula (which costs \$45 for a one-month supply), cages, materials to build cages such as wire and wood, newspapers, fresh fruit and vegetables (they go through 15 pounds of grapes each week), fresh meat, heating pads, Rubbermaid containers and towels. Michelle said they also welcome anyone who owns land and is willing to be a release site for rehabilitated animals.



The Rescue also welcomes volunteers and financial donations. One fun way to get involved is to adopt an animal and follow updates on him or her online through the web site and the Facebook page. It costs about \$25 a month to care for a squirrel.

"It's very expensive to take care of one of these animals. For example, Clairese costs about \$75 a month to take care of her with the amount of food that she takes. And, we want to give them the same food they would eat in their natural environment," Michelle said.

Despite the long hours and financial hardships, Michelle focuses on "the reward of releasing these animals back to where they need to be." When they do release an animal, they begin acclimating them to the weather and the noises in nature over several days in an outer cage. Michelle said they have even less contact with them at that point as the animals prepare to go back to the wild and to caring for themselves.

Many people ask Michelle why she wants to put so much effort into these types of animals. She says, "They are part of our ecosystem and part of our environment; they have a purpose here, even if it is, unfortunately, as a part of the food chain for something. I can't see letting these little animals just die."

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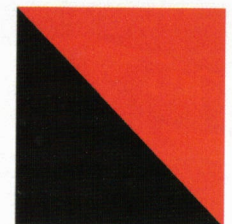
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Her compassion and care for all God's creatures is obvious in the way she handles them, talks about them and remembers them once they're released. The Rescue is a family venture for the Carollos since their three children enjoy helping with the animals. Especially active is 10-year-old Sydney who, as her mom says, "wants to be a vet when she grows up; and she's getting some real hands-on experience." Sydney remembers every animal they've had and loves to help, even if that means sitting with her mom and helping with a nighttime feeding.

Michelle's biggest word of warning for anyone who finds a wild animal in need is to not feed it.

Cow's milk and infant formula can be very dangerous to babies like Clairese. Metabolic bone disease is one danger for any wild animal who does not receive the proper amount and forms of calcium. The

best thing to do, Michelle said, is to put the animal back in its nest or den or other home. When that's not possible, they should be kept in a quiet, warm spot until a rehabber can come.

Then there was Van Gogh—the little squirrel who got himself all tangled up in a towel and was about to suffocate. When they went to cut him out of the towel, he twitched his ear right into the path of the clippers and lost part of it.

Because space is currently an issue, the Rescue will be breaking ground on a new center in Pearl River within the next few months.

The message in a quote from an unknown animal lover sums up why rehabilitators, like the Carollos, do what they do: "Those who are gifted with a great love for animals and nature and the ability to save their lives have no choice but to do all that is humanely and humanly possible."



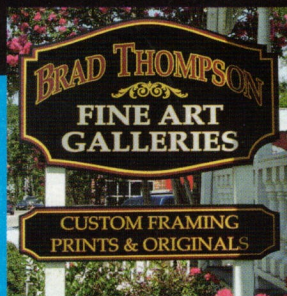
All animals receive names when they arrive—there was Scooty, the friendly raccoon; Bacon, the wild pig; and several memorable squirrels, including Miley Cyrus and a group called the Supremes.

For more information on the South East Wildlife Rescue, visit their web site: www.sewildliferescue.org; and be sure to "like" them on Facebook.

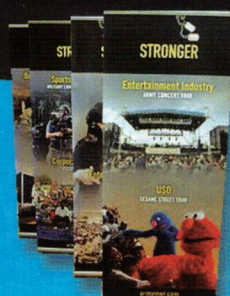
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