



The Winchester Star

HOT CENTERPIECE

Wildlife facility opens flight cage for large birds

- By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star
- Aug 2, 2017



Three barred owls that were brought to the Wildlife Veterinary Care facility in Boyce. The two in the front are young owls that are being fostered by the adult in back. The adult is teaching them how to be owls so that they can be released back into the wild.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star



Veterinarian Belinda Burwell with Wildlife Veterinary Care holds a great horned owl that was brought to the facility. The owl is unable to live in the wild and is being trained to become an educational ambassador for the WVC.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star



Veterinarian Belinda Burwell with the Wildlife Veterinary Care holds a great horned owl that was brought to the facility. The owl is unable to live in the wild and is being trained to become an educational ambassador for the WVC.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star



A barred owl that is being cared for at the Wildlife Veterinary Care facility in Boyce.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star



Two of the three fledgling Cooper's hawks that are rehabilitating at the Wildlife Veterinary Care in Boyce.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star



The new flight cage at the Wildlife Veterinary Care facility.

- Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star



MILLWOOD — Caring for wild animals requires specialized skills and deep understanding of animal behavior. For more than 30 years, Millwood-based veterinarian Belinda Burwell has cared and advocated for wild animals, most recently as founder and director of Wildlife Veterinary Care.

Wildlife Veterinary Care opened in 2015 at the Vineyard, the Burwell family farm that includes land on both sides of Tilthammer Mill Road in Clarke County. The homestead belonged to Burwell's parents, and she returned to the familial property with her husband, attorney James Klenkar. The barns and outbuildings provide plenty of space for wild creatures great and

small as well as family pets and Klenkar's herd of Angus cattle.

This week, Burwell opened Wildlife Veterinary Care's newest facility, a 36-by-76-foot flight cage for large birds. Its first occupants are a bald eagle and red-tailed hawk.

By design, the building can be fitted for many uses in addition to providing space for birds to soar.

Across the road, a smaller flight cage is presently home to three Cooper hawk fledglings. Stalls in a barn are currently full with a great horned owl, a number of barred owls and barn owls.

Smaller birds, mammals and reptiles fill cages in an addition on Burwell's home.

Animals and birds are released — usually where they were found — as soon as they are fully recovered from whatever ailment brought them to the center.

"We are all volunteer," Burwell said. "There are almost 30 volunteers, most of whom help with the transport of animals and donations of food and supplies. Three are apprentice 'rehabbers.'

"I'm trying to keep it simple, and keep it all about rescuing wildlife," she said.

In addition to the care Burwell provides animals at the farm, she is on staff at Roseville Veterinary Clinic in Boyce and Plaza Pet Clinic in Winchester, where she has access to surgery and X-ray facilities. She accepts wild animals at those locations, too.

Burwell estimates she treats about 500 animals a year. Animals are admitted through Roseville, Plaza Pet or brought directly to Wildlife Veterinary Care at the Vineyard.

“They come from animal control officers, shelters, vet clinics, the police and some come from people who have brought other injured animals to me in the past,” she said. “I also treat the wildlife rescued by other wildlife rehabilitators that need veterinary care.”

During the busy spring and summer months, Burwell said she receives 10 to 20 phone calls a day. “Fortunately, many of these wildlife emergencies can be resolved over the phone without needing to rescue the animal and take it to the hospital,” Burwell said.

During the quieter winter months, she may only receive five calls a day.

Burwell is one of many wildlife rehabilitators in Virginia. Collectively, they are a well-organized network that cares for ill, injured or orphaned wild animals.

Perhaps the most important aspect of rehabilitators’ work is educating well-intentioned people about the importance of leaving wildlife alone.

“Most of the time, wild animals don’t need to be rescued — unless they are obviously injured,” Burwell said. “The long-term chance of survival is so much better if young are left with their parents.

“Babies are always better off with their parents.”

In fact, it is illegal for individuals to keep or care for any orphaned, sick or injured wildlife unless they are licensed wildlife rehabilitators.

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) oversees the licensing of wildlife rehabilitators. This past March, DGIF established a Wildlife Rehabilitation Advisory Committee and asked Burwell to serve.

“DGIF is responsible for licensing rehabilitators, and it makes all the rules. It also wants to do a better job regulating rehabilitators.”

Burwell said the partnership between DGIF and rehabilitators is essential, because rehabilitators work daily with wildlife and people.

“The DGIF wants animals to be animals. Now, rehabilitators can provide the DGIF with an even better understanding of human-animal interaction, diseases and trends,” she said.

“I admire wild animals and their ability to survive. I’m fascinated by their behavior. That’s the zoologist in me.

“Then, there’s the compassion side. There should be help for an animal when it’s been hit by a car,” Burwell said. “As we share their space, animals need our help.”

Despite the number of calls she already receives, Burwell encourages individuals who are concerned about an animal to call her or another licensed rehabilitator.

Burwell, who graduated from Duke University in 1980 with a bachelor of science degree in zoology and earned her veterinary degree from Tufts University, has been rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife since 1987 and is a certified wildlife rehabilitator through the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council.

Burwell also serves on the Certified Wildlife Rehabilitator Examination Board and on the Advisory Board of the Animal Rescue Fund.

She is a Virginia Master Naturalist and Instructor.

Wildlife Veterinary Care is a nonprofit organization that relies on financial donations for medications, food and caging for the animals. Donations are not used for salaries or fundraising events, Burwell said.

“My goal always is to give animals the best possible care, and make it as easy as possible for the public to find information and help,” Burwell said.

“A friend from high school recently visited and said, ‘Wow! This is what you always dreamed of doing.’ I thanked her for reminding me. This really is what I’ve always wanted to do.”

Learn more about the Wildlife Veterinary Care center at wildlifevetcare.com. Call the center at 540-664-9494, or reach Burwell at belinda@wildlifevetcare.org.

The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries maintains an up-to-date list of all licensed wildlife rehabilitators. The list includes the species specialty of each rehabilitator. Go to dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/injured/rehabilitators.

— Contact Cathy Kuehner at ckuehner@winchesterstar.com