

Volunteering is for the birds for Belcarra women



Anne Marie Oktaba of Belcarra is one of about 200 volunteers who help with the care and release of birds and small mammals after they are rehabilitated at the Wild Life Rescue Association in Burnaby.

Mario Bartel/Black Press

By [Diane Strandberg - The Tri-City News](#)

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Volunteer Week is April 10 to 16.

It could have been a scene from a Disney movie but instead of a lonely orphan reconnecting with his long-lost family, the central character of this touching scene was a tiny Goldeneye.

The black and white seaduck with a golden button of an eye was swimming towards a group of three or four ducks with similar plumage that paddled toward it, as if in greeting.

For Belcarra resident Anne Marie Oktaba, it was a special moment.

“A life’s a life, right?” she said.

Similar reunions have played out over the years in Oktaba’s life since she joined the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC as a volunteer in 2009, and each one is special, she said, because of the feeling of accomplishment when a rehabilitated animal is returned to the wild.

“If you can help one injured animal,” she said, “there is a sense of pride in that you are doing good for the whole species.”

Oktaba is one of 200 volunteers who work at WRA’s Burnaby facility, located at the west end of Burnaby Lake. She helps feed and care for some of the 3,000 injured, orphaned and pollution-damaged wild animals and transports them for release into the wild.

The centre requires numerous volunteers to look after animals that are rescued by Lower Mainland residents. She has released families of ducklings, tiny song birds, squirrels and even a marmot, and travels hundreds of miles a year to do this task.

To mark Volunteer Week, the Wildlife Rescue Association is highlighting the work of all its volunteers, and Oktaba in particular for her commitment and dedication.

“When she’s in, we know a lot of things will be taken care of,” said Linda Bakker, the association’s volunteer co-ordinator, who said Oktaba also trains and mentors new volunteers.

Oktaba decided to get involved with the organization when she was looking for a change in her life. “I had brought in a couple of injured birds in the past and I wanted to give back.”

It turned out she got more out of the volunteer work than she expected and now knows the names and habits of many local birds. She also learned that house cats, including her own, can be a threat to fledgling birds and should be kept indoors, especially during nesting season.

“I’m trying to not let him out quite as often,” and Oktaba.

Some of the birds and small mammals brought into the centre can’t be rehabilitated but many do survive and are successfully released into the wild. Watching the birds take flight or a released squirrel scamper into the woods around her home is a joyful experience, Oktaba said.

The Goldeneye release was particularly memorable because it almost didn’t survive. Some people picked it up after they spotted it floating upside down in Belcarra Bay. It had a punctured air sac, which accounted for the loss of balance and buoyancy, but was rehabilitated after a few weeks at the animal care centre.

Oktaba met up with the duck’s rescuers on the beach and everyone was surprised and pleased when the released Goldeneye was reunited with its mates.

“It was really touching, they were the ones who found the bird and they didn’t even think he would make it,” Oktaba said of the rescuers.

But the little Goldeneye did make it, thanks to the biologists, animal technologists and those people who volunteer their time at the Wildlife Rescue Association.

• For information and details about upcoming orientation sessions for new volunteers, visit www.wildliferescue.ca.

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