

Burnaby NewsLeader

Spring a busy time at Wildlife Rescue



A one-year old pelican is currently the star patient at the Wildlife Rescue Association in Burnaby, where he's recovering from frostbitten feet after he was discovered at Ogden Point in Victoria.

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The baby duck sits in its cage, quietly huddled against a stuffed cocker spaniel toy for warmth and comfort.

It's less than a week old, yet it has already been separated from its mother and siblings, and found itself a temporary home at the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C.'s (WRA) care centre on the shores of Burnaby Lake.

For Lani Sheldon, the association's team leader for wildlife rehabilitation, it's that time of year again when the breeding season and human interaction with wildlife leads to an influx of young animals needing help.

Every year, about 3,000 animals arrive at the WRA, two-thirds of which show up in the spring and summer. Ducklings alone make up about 200 of that number.

The duckling at the centre this week, and likely the next 12 weeks, was brought in by someone who found it at the side of

the road in West Vancouver. While baby songbirds are often left alone, a duckling without its mother nearby is a sure sign that something is wrong, said Sheldon.

She believes this particular duckling may have become separated from its family during the walk between their nest and the closest water source, something the mother duck does very shortly after her eggs have hatched.

In the Lower Mainland, that often means having to navigate busy roads. This duckling has signs of trauma so it may have been clipped by a car. Crows, hawks and other predators will sometimes pick off the babies before the mom notices.

With mother ducks often escorting a brood of about a dozen ducklings, the decision not to backtrack to find a straggler is often the result of a cost-benefit analysis, Sheldon said. Do you go back and put the other 11 at risk?

Help with care

One of the biggest challenges faced by local wildlife is people's good intentions.

"If they see a bird on the ground, people immediately think they need help," Sheldon said. It's best to leave them alone and monitor the situation as its parents may be nearby or just off foraging for food.

"It's like if you're at the grocery store with your toddler and he ends up going down the wrong aisle, you wouldn't want someone to just pick him up and take him home."

People do need to be cautious when dealing with mammals as human scent will scare off parents if they're nearby.

The WRA often receives baby raccoons, squirrels and skunks, often extricated from attics or porches where they've been nesting. If no parents are around and the animals are very young—tiny with eyes closed—they're definitely in need of help and a call to the WRA is in order.

A pelican in a pique

The Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C. was started in 1979 by a group of volunteers who basically learned through trial and error. Prior to that, people would bring distressed animals to veterinarians, the SPCA or biologists, none of whom had any expertise in rehabilitating animals.

Today, wildlife rehabilitation is a certified profession, Sheldon said. The WRA is run largely on private donations, by seven staff and about 200 volunteers.

It's now got three decades of experience to draw on even when non-native species arrive, such as the pelican which came to Burnaby a month ago from Victoria, where it was

found wandering the downtown streets suffering from frostbite on its feet.

Native to California and Oregon, the year-old large-beaked bird was likely separated from its flock during migration. During a recent visit by a reporter, it was having a “pelican tantrum,” flicking its food, smelts kept in a tub of water, onto the ground which was already littered with the little fish.

It will be another week or two before it’s released in an appropriate location. All birds released by WRA are tagged in an effort to track their progress.

A recent mammal arrival is a yellow-bellied marmot, native to the B.C. Interior, which was driven down from Merritt by the owner of a pickup truck who couldn’t get it out from under the hood. He’d tried setting traps at night and called his local SPCA, to no avail.

Meanwhile, the marmot’s distress cry is something akin to the piercing sound made by some home security alarms, a noise the pickup owner had to withstand during the drive down.

Sheldon said they managed to get it out with the help of a catch pole, the truck owner partially dismantling his engine and a whole lot of luck.

The little baseball-sized black ball of fur is recovering from burns to its paws and annoyance at being taken so far from home. It will be treated and released back to the wild. WRA staff say it’s female and likely pre-adult in age, like a teenager in human terms.

“Again, it tends to be the young ones that get in trouble,” Sheldon said.

- The Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C. hosts Earth Fest, a free family event, on Sunday, April 25, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Burnaby Lake Rowing Pavilion.

For more information on the event, donating or volunteering, visit www.wildliferescue.ca or call 604-526-2747.

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