



When Skidaway Island resident, Lis Overton, found an injured young flying squirrel, she was unsure how to help the animal. The Humane Society for Greater Savannah is not equipped to care for such a case and Chatham County Animal Control's only option was euthanasia. Thankfully, Savannah Wildlife Rescue Center (SWRC) in Thunderbolt fills the care void.

SWRC treated the flying squirrel, dubbed Squeaky, and integrated it into a new colony. When the squirrels are old enough to survive on their own, they will be released back into the wild together.

SWRC's executive director, Jeanne Paddison, has several decades of experience caring for animals in need, ever since her father brought her an orphaned baby raccoon when she was a teenager. "This is Mandy, who started it all," she gestures to a large painting of a raccoon over her desk. "I had this painted as a reminder that all this started because of her, and I have never stopped."

SWRC rescues orphaned and injured animals, providing medical

care, vaccinations, parasite control, and a peaceful environment for healing and growing. The organization's goal is rescue, not serve as a sanctuary. "As rehabilitators, everything that comes into this clinic is either rehabilitated and released back into the wild, or sent to heaven," says Paddison. She explains the peril of returning to its natural habitat a wild animal that can't protect itself or escape from a predator, so sometimes euthanasia is the most humane option.

Some animals fall into a gray area – too healthy for euthanasia but too handicapped to heal and survive on their own. A young coyote was found on the Truman Parkway suffering from a severe injury to its leg. "We could either put her down or fix her leg. But it was just her leg," explains Paddison. Thanks to the compassion of veterinarian Dr. Keri Jenkins, the coyote had six pins and a plate put in her leg, and she will eventually be returned to the wild.

Many of the younger creatures SWRC handles have a degree of human imprinting, sometimes due to care and feeding by volunteers. When the animals are old enough, to help with the imprinting issue,

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The SWRC is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of orphaned or injured wildlife. Through educational outreach, the center provides environmental awareness and encourages the community to help protect our delicate ecosystem and to live harmoniously with wildlife. SWRC does not rehabilitate reptiles or birds. Please visit The Georgia Wildlife Rescue Association to find a rehabber for the specific species you have found.



they go into cages with their age group, and eventually are released together.

"They know each other, they know their species, their smell, and what foods to look for. It's very easy to get them back out into the wild," Paddison says. "I just took a cage of 26 squirrels to a remote area in the Landings. A family whose land has been declared a wildlife sanctuary absolutely loves wildlife in their yard and they have lots of acreage for them to spread out and enjoy life."

SWRC has access to various sites in southeast Georgia where it releases animals. Spread out to avoid over-population, release sites are approved and monitored by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), to manage the state's wildlife. Land with old-growth trees or woodlands with a water source with no hunting is ideal. "There's a lot of thought that goes into the process, receiving the animal through the door to getting it back out the door," Paddison says.

The DNR monitors rescue groups through annual inspections, ensuring rehabbers adhere to established regulations for responsible wildlife management. "They examine everything – your meds, your cages, your cleanliness, the way you handle the animals," Paddison explains. "If your clinic is not up to par, they close you down."

However, the agency provides no support or funding. SWRC costs approximately \$86,000 a year to operate. "Every penny we make goes toward animal care, rent, or our \$600-a-month electric bill," explains Paddison. "Our water bill is crazy because we usually have water tanks for otters and beavers. They come in around February and are here four to five months, with us refilling those tanks every day."

Squirrels are among the clinic's most common "clients," with more than 300 squirrels this past autumn. They go through \$200 worth of nuts per week – unshelled walnuts, pecans and almonds. The facility is staffed by volunteers, each providing different levels of time, commitment and experience. Responsibilities include maintaining a safe, clean and peaceful environment for animals to heal and grow. A quiet demeanor and strong work ethic are necessary. On-the-job training is provided.

BY PHILIP SCHWEIER



## SWRC SUCCESSES

Lucy (left), a 10-week-old otter, was found in April of 2019 on the north end of Tybee Island. At SWRC, the team discovered that Lucy was a boy otter. Not suited for independence in the wild, he was eventually released at a five-acre pond on a local farm, where he enjoys a great deal of freedom.

Jeanne Paddison explains that animals need to encounter their own kind to survive and thrive. “It won’t know it’s an otter or recognize what another otter is supposed to smell like.” This year, when another otter named Cory needed a home, Paddison considered pairing him with Lucy. “We weren’t sure, both being males,” she Paddison says, “but we tried it, and now they’re best buddies.”

Eddie, a skunk, is another success story. The sole survivor of his family, he was rescued from the side of the road and integrated into a new family. One of Paddison’s long-time volunteers had moved to a farm near Dublin, which she generously offered as a release site

for the skunks. However, three weeks after being released, Eddie migrated to a neighboring farm and set up residence under the farmer’s bush hog. Tragically, Eddie suffered severe injuries when the farmer cranked up his machine. The former volunteer was away when it happened, but after learning of Eddie’s injuries, she contacted Paddison, and Eddie returned to Thunderbolt to recuperate.

After several surgeries and treatments – including acupuncture – Eddie is on the road to recovery. His septum was broken, and he suffered numerous deep lacerations. His leg was broken, and though it’s been fixed, it will never heal enough to enable him to run from a predator. He broke his jaw and hlost some teeth, serious challenges to his survival in the wild. Eddie has one more surgery ahead of him. Once he is fully recovered, his scent glands will be removed, and he will become a permanent resident at SWRC. Perhaps, he will become an ambassador for SWRC, visiting classrooms and advocating for wildlife.

SWRC currently 45 volunteers caring for its animals; five workers per shift, three shifts a day. “We go out to the colleges and recruit, we have about 25 interns a season. We couldn’t do what we do without them,” Paddison says.

This year, SWRC has treated and released close to 1,000 animals from all over Georgia. It is the only licensed rescue organization in southeast Georgia. According to Paddison, the next closest rehab facility in the state is four hours away. “There are some people that work out of their homes, but that’s very limiting because you can’t have rabies-vector species in a residential area – raccoons, skunks, fox, coyotes, bats, mink otters, beavers, none of those. They require a special license.”

Last spring, as people began working from home, walking dogs during hours they’d usually be at work., they found distressed baby squirrels and other critters, especially fawns. Many of the fawns would have gone to other deer rehabbers around the state, such as AWARE in Lithonia. But most rescue organizations were closed due to Covid-19, so SWRC received animals from all over Georgia.

“There are compassionate people out there who want to see these animals taken care of...they driving five, six hours to us,” Paddison says. When influx surged, she distributed the animals among her foster caregivers; but, to continue providing care, she had to re-open in May. “We made it work, and had we not re-opened, there wouldn’t be 1,000 animals back in the wild doing the job nature intended.”

Education is a large part of SWRC’s mission. Paddison notes that many of her phone conversations are spent educating people,



SWRC executive director Jeanne Paddison, with a portrait of Mandy, her first rescue

helping them to understand how to co-exist with wildlife. Though homeowners may complain that animals are ruining their properties, it’s the natural result of building our homes in wild environments, like rapid development in west Chatham County. “Pooler is developing forested areas, and the animals are being forced out, often into more densely human populated areas,” Paddison explains. “Last June, I rescued a coyote from Drayton and Bay Streets, and a few years ago I rescued one from a laundry room in a hotel on Bay Street.”

In the island communities around Savannah, animals seeking water access routinely pass through residential areas, and inevita-

bly discover cat or dog food left on a porch or patio, or root through garbage looking for scraps, or find fresh water in swimming pools. With such easy sources for food or water, wild animals spend increasing amounts of their time in populated areas, adapting to urbanization as humans encroach on their habitats. Paddison advises homeowners not to be alarmed, as wildlife is typically non-confrontational and uninterested in humans. “At the Landings, a fox may live on the edge of your property, and watch you, but it’s not a threat, generally,” Paddison says. “It just want to be left alone.”

One might believe an easy, humane answer is to trap an intrusive animal and release it elsewhere. However, Paddison says that is not necessarily effective. “People think they’re doing good trapping a mother raccoon and her babies and releasing them somewhere else,” she says, “but it actually puts them at greater risk. They compete with other animals for food, they don’t know where their water supply is, babies are left vulnerable, and it’s almost always a death sentence.”

SWRC is committed to releasing healthy, productive animals that know how to do their jobs. All animals – from rats and mice on up the food chain to larger predators – help maintain nature’s balance. For instance, opossums eat their weight in ticks each year and don’t carry diseases humans or other animals get. They eat mole crickets, grubs and baby copperheads, without getting sick, helping keep humans and their house pets healthy.

Every animal that comes to SWRC is compromised in one way or another, and Paddison’s team never knows what kind of challenge they’re going to face. “But we’ve never said no to an animal in need,” Paddison says proudly. “Our door is open to any call we get.”

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