photography by KATHY MILANI/THE HSUS

many happy returns

At the newest addition to The HSUS's network of animal care centers, South Florida's rehabilitated wildlife can indeed go home again

by ALAN GREEN

The first patients ushered through the intake and examination areas on this autumn Sunday represent nothing out of the ordinary for veterinarian Stefan Harsch: There's a parrot with a separated shoulder, a duck unable to waddle, and a hobbled juvenile squirrel with a severely sprained leg. In the nearby triage area is a shoebox full of ducklings whose mother was found dead near their nesting site. Among yesterday's late arrivals requiring follow-up care are two with fractured limbs: a raccoon and a long-legged water bird. And the worried phone calls besieging the admissions staff foretell what else the day may bring: A woman fears that a snarling opossum in her backyard shed may be rabid; a dove has flown into a window on a seventh-story balcony; a kayaker has spotted an injured wading bird futilely struggling to reach the nearby shoreline.

These are familiar challenges for Harsch, a thoughtful and engaging German expatriate who practices his uncommon brand of veterinary medicine with nonchalant confidence. In fact, over the last few days he's treated only the sort of illnesses and injuries that he's grown all too accustomed to seeing during his five years at the SPCA Wildlife Care Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: the raccoon with distemper, the warbler with a possible concussion, the screech owl with a broken wing, the opossum with a busted leg, the migrating songbird mauled by a cat, the rabbit with a nasty case of ear mites.

And there was the inevitable procession of Muscovy ducks, with problems ranging from predator-inflicted injuries and botulism to 15 inches of fishing line dangling from one bird's beak—a telltale sign of a fish hook embedded somewhere in his gullet or stomach. After administering anesthesia, Harsch probed deep inside the duck's throat until finally locating the hook. He pushed upward with a finger until the point and barb emerged through the swollen tissue, then sheared them with wire cutters. "I once took 13 hooks out of a pelican in one session," he said while gingerly removing the neutered steel shank.

Veterinarian Stefan Harsch removes a fish hook from a Muscovy duck's throat with assistance from vet tech Christel Fiddyment. Most injured waterfowl admitted to the center have swallowed hooks or become entangled in fishing lines.

Mission accomplished and the prognosis good, the Muscovy was transferred to a nearby recovery room, where he joined a peacock with mangled legs, a limping Pekin duck, a one-eyed rabbit, a parrot missing chest and tail feathers, hatchlings squatting beside heat lamps, and a menagerie of other mammals, birds, and reptiles in various stages of recuperation.

By early afternoon on this torrid Sunday, though, Harsch's familiar routine gives way to a pair of befuddling cases. First, three women show up with a dazed red-shouldered hawk found lying beside a house near downtown Fort Lauderdale. Minutes later, an ambulance arrives with the severely bruised great blue heron the kayaker called about.

No matter how they arrive, these animals have often been on the losing end of a clash with human civilization.

Ambulance driver Jacquelyn Johnston, who plucked the slumped-over bird from the marshy water, has radioed dispatch to say the heron has one drooping wing and is apparently suffering from capture myopathy—a mostly fatal condition that inflicts such severe muscle damage victims are typically left unable to walk. The heron is not paralyzed upon being admitted, and minutes later the first blood tests reveal his major organs to be intact. But as the intravenous electrolytes flow, Harsch nevertheless gives his listless patient only a 5 percent chance of survival. "If he's not standing in two days," he says dourly, "the treatment is not working and there's little hope."

The hawk's condition appears less dire, but the cause of his ills is a mystery: His wings look good, his reflexes are fine, an eye examination reveals nothing. After blood is drawn from the raptor's jugular vein, Harsch begins a diagnostic process that soon has him hunched over a microscope counting types of white blood cells. An X-ray might also provide clues, but the hawk's weakened state requires that it wait.

Pending completion of the blood tests, Harsch speculates the hawk may be suffering from trauma or an infection such as West Nile virus. He's frustrated by the incomplete diagnosis, but for the moment, he can only start a precautionary regimen of antibiotics and move the dazed bird to a nearby wildlife ward.

Besides, someone has just brought in a traumatized duck needing stitches. After that, Harsch will need to check on turtles being readied for release to the wild and a baby duck who tore the bandages off her ripped foot webbing. There's a grounded kingfisher who flew into a window and a seabird whose broken wing needs bandaging. Before ending his day, Harsch will also treat one Muscovy duck hit by a car and yet another with botulism, a disease caused by ingestion of a toxin found in stagnant water and resulting in paralysis of the legs, neck, and wings.

And the following morning, it will all start anew.

MISSION CRITICAL

Most days, two of the center's three ambulances run continual rescue missions from south of Miami to the northern reaches of Palm Beach County, nearly 100 miles away. At the hospital admissions desk, staff members greet a parade of walk-ins toting cages and cardboard boxes. Sheriff's deputies and police patrol units ferry injured animals to the hospital. So do humane officers, parks department workers, and wildlife rehabilitators lacking the necessary equipment or expertise.

No matter how they arrive, though, these animals have often been on the losing end of a clash with human civilization. They fly into buildings, entangle themselves in plastic six-pack rings, are attacked by outdoor cats, or get hit by cars. Some people kidnap fledg-

lings, mistakenly worried about the birds' prospects for survival. Others feed protein-rich cat food to waterfowl, potentially causing a disease that leaves them with crooked wings. And two vases in the admissions area display hooks, bobbers, weights, and lures—some as long as 6 inches—removed from birds who made off either with a fisherman's bait or with the trash that anglers often leave behind.

Some ducks are victims of drivers intentionally swerving to hit them; other birds come in harboring BBs or pellets. Last autumn, there were two rabbits in recovery who'd been thrown from a moving car (a third died). Johnston once picked up a duck walking around a residential neighborhood with two 26-inch arrows in his torso—one with a triangular tip used by hunters to kill deer or boar. That duck died as the ambulance reached the hospital driveway, although another with a 6-inch dart through her throat somehow survived. "We see horrible things," says Harsch. "We ask ourselves, What on earth happened here?"

It's a question the organization's caretakers have been asking since October 1969, when Beatrice Humphries opened the SPCA Wild Bird Care Center in a little house near the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Known locally as The Bird Lady of Fort Lauderdale, Humphries had for many years rehabilitated injured and orphaned wild birds from her garage, where her volunteers included two eager teenagers: Sherry Schlueter and her younger sister, Shelly.

Shelly eventually took over day-to-day operations of the nonprofit center, which moved to an adjacent 4-acre property and expanded its services to mammals and reptiles—a change that eventually led to a new name for the center. Sherry was more interested in the laws that affect animals and went to work conducting investigations for the Humane Society of Broward County. She later carved out a pioneering niche with the county sheriff's office, focusing on animal cruelty and then other forms of abuse and neglect. But she never strayed far from her animal-care roots, and in 1990 she joined the wildlife center's board of directors, serving for years as vice president.

One of the center's original volunteers, Sherry Schlueter has returned to her roots as its new executive director.

Shortly after the SPCA Wildlife Care Center entered into a corporate combination with The HSUS last June (making it the fifth animal care center under the auspices of The HSUS),

After a concerned citizen notified the center, ambulance driver Jacquelyn Johnston (right) kayaked through marshy waters to rescue this injured great blue heron.

The center's nursery cares for an average of 450 baby opossums every nesting season. Some of the patients have lost their mothers to car accidents or dogs, some have fallen from their moms' pouches or backs, and some are brought in by people who mistakenly believe the animals have been orphaned. An incubation system simulates the mother's moist pouch, and babies cuddle stuffed animals as they would their mothers and siblings.

Sherry Schlueter traded her lieutenant's badge for the role of the center's executive director. In that capacity, she aims to ensure the organization's work embodies one underlying principle: "When animals come through our doors," she says, "they have every chance of survival."

And come they do. In a typical year, this privately funded hospital treats about 13,000 injured and orphaned animals from across southeast Florida, including both native wildlife and exotic and domestic pets local shelters aren't equipped to handle. With an annual budget of about $3 million, the 62 staff members and 400-plus volunteers work toward a single-minded goal: rescuing, rehabilitating, and releasing native species and finding adoptive homes for the others.

To accomplish that, the center maintains an ever-expanding assortment of buildings, cages, and enclosures to temporarily house as many as 900 animals at a time. Behind the hospital is a shorebird habitat where recovered gulls and ibis test their wings; nearby, orphaned ducklings nurtured by surrogate mothers get their sea legs in a plastic wading pool. One trailer has been converted to a nursery, complete with a walk-in incubator to help prepare newborn critters for their pre-release digs. There is a cement pond for turtles with busted shells, and beside it a sandy enclosure where tortoises go to mend. There are mews for raptors awaiting their turn in the cavernous flight-conditioning aviary, and a birdhouse where blue jays cavort with spot-breasted orioles and others who call South Florida their permanent or migratory home. Raccoons, squirrels, and opossums (the most frequently treated mammals) have their own enclosures, as do reptiles and mourning doves, farm animals, bunnies, and domestic pets like guinea pigs and parakeets.

A fenced-in pelican pool, complete with sand and wood pilings, is visible from a window in the hospital's admissions area. For a staff that must process a never-ending stream of animals in distress, these great-billed seabirds offer welcome relief. "We sit and watch them play," says Steve Rosenberg, who fields distress calls from the public and admits patients. "We call it peli-vision."

REST FOR THE WEARY

Just outside the Wildlife Care Center's main gate are a half-dozen cages for animals dropped off after 8 p.m., when the hospital is locked down. Although people typically leave raccoons, pigeons, and other familiar creatures, staff arriving at sunrise have found everything from an alligator to a 90-pound potbellied pig crammed into a night cage. One morning they discovered an empty cardboard box beside the cages with a hole chewed through it, so it's anyone's guess what limped, flapped, or slithered away.

The nonnative species—emus and arctic foxes, kinkajous and sugar gliders—may have endured injury, neglect, or abandonment. Motorists dump animals beside the front gate and speed away. The

center's "Chicken Palace" houses discarded Easter chicks and birds confiscated from cockfighters and from Santeria priests keeping them for religious sacrifice. Some have offloaded their exotic pets here because the animals don't match their new carpeting.

Treating domestic and exotic pets has earned the center scorn from some wildlife rehabilitators, who insist the facility should care only for native species. But Schlueter is unapologetic for two reasons: Few other organizations have the resources and expertise to help these animals, she says. And the center provides an alternative to those who would instead let exotics loose near sensitive ecosystems like the Everglades, where they pose a threat to native species.

As a result, all patients get the same quality of care—a seven-day-a-week effort carried out by three staff veterinarians who concoct anesthesia face masks for pelicans from two-liter Coke bottles and perform diagnoses with a cutting-edge digital X-ray machine. The gift of a patron, this $80,000 apparatus offers vivid close-ups of fractured bones, injured organs, and in the case of one hobbled opossum, the six newborn "pinkies" secretly nestled in her pouch. The team is aided by accomplished wildlife rehabilitators and by veterinary specialists who undertake such pro bono tasks as performing eye surgery on owls. And because veterinary schools offer minimal training in wildlife medicine, doctors here turn to an online community when puzzling through a particularly tricky case.

The 44-year-old Harsch, who traded a career in molecular biology for what he considers a far more creative profession, admits he's still learning. Wildlife medicine, he says, may use the same principles as conventional veterinary medicine, but there are unique requirements and notable differences. "Our patients are all very ungrateful," he says. "They just want to get out of here. They don't lick your face and love you. And they better not, or something is wrong."

BY THE *Numbers*

40 Years the Wildlife Care Center has been in operation	**365** Days open per year
1 Full-time rescue and release vehicle	**2** Full-time wildlife ambulances
62 Staff	**400+** Volunteers
40-100 Phone calls received each day	**50-85** Baby animals admitted each day during baby season
800-900 Animals housed each day	**13,000** Animals admitted per year

The "Chicken Palace," opened last year, is home to hens and roosters saved from cockfighting rings, ritual sacrifice, and abandonment. "Every chicken in the county is going to be lined up at our doorstep, bags packed, waiting to get in," joked volunteer Jerry Madden after helping to build the cozy structure.

UP, UP, AND AWAY

One week after their arrivals, the prognoses for the red-shouldered hawk and the great blue heron have improved. The heron is eating well and standing on his hocks (the equivalent of human ankles), and his wing is on the mend—a recovery significant enough that Stefan Harsch, surprised by this dramatic turn of events, has upped the bird's chances of survival fivefold to 25 percent. The hawk is found to have an elevated white blood cell count, which Harsch attributes to stress or an infection of undetermined origin. To be safe, he's keeping the raptor on antibiotics and continuing to monitor his progress.

But their recuperation does not continue in lockstep. A few days later the hawk is relocated to a small outdoor recovery area, after which he'll be moved to the flight cage for pre-release conditioning. The heron also moves outdoors, but his entanglement in something beneath the water's surface so constricted the flow of blood that the tip of one wing is dead, and if it doesn't fall off Harsch will have to amputate; in either case, releasing the bird would be a death sentence. But because herons are very territorial and don't thrive in captivity, finding him a permanent home might very well be impossible. "So he will stay with us for quite some time," Harsch predicts, "and if we cannot find placement we will have to euthanize him."

A heat lamp keeps these orphaned Muscovy ducklings warm. An exotic species, they will be released only to private landowners and not into the wild.

Finding suitable homes for nonnative species can be equally daunting. For example, six days after Harsch wrangled the hook from that Muscovy duck's throat, the bird had fully recovered. But since these resilient and prolific breeders aren't native to Florida, it's unlawful to release them; instead, a center adoption specialist must find them homes on private property, whether in backyard habitats or on the retention ponds of willing gated communities. "We want to give them adequate care," Harsch says, "but what will you do with them afterwards?" Ditto the interloping peafowl and nonnative parrots, sacrificial chickens and abandoned farm animals, unwanted pocket pets and a hundred-odd rabbits who are prepared for adoption by a volunteer Bunny Brigade.

From tortoises and sugar gliders to pigs and guinea pigs, the center's 2009 intake included more than 240 species by the end of November. "The goal is to save whomever we can," says executive director Sherry Schlueter.

But if relocating introduced species and exotic pets is time-consuming—albeit rewarding—the real magic of this place is the return of orphaned and rehabilitated wild animals to their native environments. That effort is coordinated by Greg Adler, who crisscrosses the region in search of areas to repatriate the seabirds, squirrels, tortoises, and raptors nursed back to health or rescued from danger. An opossum is easy: Put the cage beside a tree at dusk, and the nocturnal animal eventually scurries for cover. A baby great horned owl who'd fallen 40 feet from a nest proved more challenging: Adler and Jacquelyn Johnston placed the bird in a laundry basket, which they then hoisted onto an upper limb of a nearby tree in a safer, quieter location. The anxious parents, who had tried to feed their displaced youngster by dropping half a rat carcass to the ground below, harassed the rescue team with flybys before finally letting them complete their work. With their baby secured in his makeshift nest, the pair settled in and raised him there.

One autumn weekday, Adler drives his ambulance to a vast, wooded park, where he sets a cage on the grass and opens its door. One by one, a trio of hand-raised woodpeckers heads for a nearby tree, where they survey their wide-open surroundings before eventually hightailing it. Three warblers follow suit, and when Adler opens his gloved palm, a small waterthrush vaults for the skies. An hour later, on an empty stretch of beach, the ritual is repeated with gulls brought to the center a day apart. The two shorebirds, who've recuperated together from symptoms of botulism, fly in tandem to a deserted spot near the ocean's edge, then head skyward to join a lone gull flapping his way south. "This is the happy part, the joyous part," Schlueter says. "We wish them a long and happy life and hope we never see them again."

HOME, SWEET HOME

More than two weeks later, Adler again pilots his ambulance through the streets of Fort Lauderdale, this time with a red-shouldered hawk bound for a park near where he was found. The adult bird, whose diagnosis has stumped Stefan Harsch to the very end, has had a smooth recovery during his 18 days in captivity. He's gained weight and, over the three previous days, navigated the L-shaped flight conditioning aviary with no signs of muscle atrophy. So Adler sets the bird beside a tree and removes the hood designed to keep him calm. In short order, the great raptor flies onto a branch, where for minutes he preens himself and gets reacquainted with the neighborhood. The only apparent threat is a group of blue jays, whose alarmed squawks soon die down.

If this is a triumphant moment for the SPCA Wildlife Care Center, Adler is decidedly blasé. After all, the release has not only gone off without a hitch, but his attention is divided by the ever-lengthy list of animals prepping for their own return home, including turtles, opossums, raccoons, and two more red-shouldered hawks who shared the flight cage with the one perched overhead.

And that list will only increase, as will the center's roster of nonnative species. In fact, in the five hours preceding this hawk's release, 16 more animals are cleared through admissions, including a mauled parrot and a squirrel with a fractured leg. By the 8 p.m. closing, another 16 will be sent to triage or directly for examination, among them an albatross, a couple of pigeons, and a snake with a neck injury.

Not surprisingly, another four Muscovy ducks arrive that day, although one also departs: In late afternoon, the woman who'd rescued the Muscovy with the embedded fish hook shows up and agrees to provide him with a safe habitat. Thirteen days later, another of the center's birds also earns a reprieve: A nearby botanical garden, in search of a replacement for a recently deceased heron, agrees to take the flightless great blue. Harsch, who just a month earlier gave this traumatized bird a 1-in-20 chance of survival, and who believed the odds of finding him a home to be equally slim, expects that the heron's damaged wing tip will soon fall off and a follow-up exam will clear the way for discharge. "We just have to wait for that," Harsch says, gratified by his patient's improbable recovery. "And then he'll be on his way to his permanent location." ■

Release coordinator Greg Adler gives a second chance to a seagull who has recovered from botulism. "Releasing an animal back to the wild," he says, "is one of the most rewarding parts of the job."