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CALL OF THE

Wild



What started as a hobby is now a passion for Londoner Brian Salt, whose Salthaven Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Centre provides a safe place for for injured, displaced or orphaned creatures



As you approach the farmhouse, you're not sure what kind of welcoming committee to expect. In pleasant weather, you may be greeted by a chorus of birds in outdoor cages enjoying the day. Driving slowly is the watchword here, so as not to startle them or Brydget the hawk if she is perched outside.

This is Salthaven (pronounced salt haven) Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Centre, established by Brian Salt, a professional drummer turned volunteer wildlife rehabilitator. At one time, Salt pounded out the backbeat for the band Low Down. But he's also been in tune with the rhythms of nature.

Years ago, when the Salt family lived in the Oakridge area of London, the five children turned to dad to help injured and abandoned wildlife that they found around their home. Salt began to practice informal backyard rehabilitation. "We believe we have a stewardship, a responsibility to our fellow creatures," says Salt.

left: Brian Salt bottle-feeds the fawns. They came to Salthaven when they were just a few days old and had to be fed every two hours, 24 hours a day. Although the people who rescued them believed they had been abandoned, Salt says a doe will leave her newborns for up to six hours at a time, and they likely should not have been moved. "If you find a fawn and it has a warm, moist nose then its best to leave it alone," he says. "It's likely being taken care of." above: Dakota the groundhog hasn't developed and grown enough to be released before winter, so Salt has fashioned a simulated burrow where Dakota will hibernate until spring. right: Nahanni, a female American kestrel, was orphaned when her nest was inadvertently destroyed. Although their intentions were good, the people who rescued her did not provide a proper diet and Nahanni's flight leathers did not develop properly. She will remain at Salthaven over the winter, strengthening her flight leathers and learning to hunt for her own food, before she is released.

Salt completed formal training to become certified in rehabilitation training skills and advanced clinical pathology.

Over the years the family has provided a safe haven for hundreds of orphaned, injured, sick and displaced opossums, raccoons, fawns, squirrels, baby cottontail rabbits, different species of hawks, geese and other birds.

What started as a hobby became a passion. When the undertaking got to be too big, the family moved to a rural area. Three years ago they settled at their current site, chosen specifically because it would accommodate the wildlife rehabilitation operation. Salthaven is located on 100 acres of land just outside of London in Mount Brydges, Ontario.



right, above: This great horned owl arrived with a badly infected wing, the result of an animal bite. Within four weeks he was released in good health. **above:** Some rehabilitation requires a little ingenuity. Salt straightened out this robin fledgling's deformed feet by taping them to flat cardboard "shoes". Once it learned to balance and could fend for itself, it was successfully released. **right:** BJ the blue jay sings for his supper. In the beginning baby jays are handled every 20 minutes from sun-up to sundown. **opposite page:** Many Virginia opossums stowaway on produce trucks in the southern United States and accidentally end up in Canada. They are not well suited to our harsh winters, and, if they survive, will often suffer frostbite on their furless fingers, ears and tails.

Salt completed formal training to become certified in rehabilitation training skills and advanced clinical pathology. He is licensed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Canadian Wildlife Services, one of 92 Wildlife Rehabilitators in Ontario, and sits on the board of the Ontario Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Network.

Salthaven's goal is to rehabilitate the birds and animals, then reintroduce them to their natural habitat—and to do this as quickly as possible. Salt says that young orphans in particular do significantly better if they are cuddled and touched, but there is a danger that they will become too attached to their human caregivers. It is important that they learn to interact with their own species, hunt for their own food and live as wild creatures.

"We try to minimize habituating and imprinting [on humans] as much as possible," says Salt. Imprinting in birds and habituating in animals is the process through which the young develop normal social and territorial behaviour.

Once a bird or animal has healed from an injury or is old enough to feed on its own, it is transferred to a pre-release pen where it will have no direct, positive contact with humans. Volunteers are directed to be "noisy and obnox-



ious" when they are delivering food, Salt says, to ensure the creatures learn to mistrust humans. Grown deer are placed with a local herd of domestic deer until they are ready to be released.

Salt estimates that 90% of the wildlife that come to Salthaven have been injured, displaced or orphaned because of human actions—animals hit by cars, birds injured by a family pet, wildlife unwittingly poisoned by pesticides or by licking up leaked antifreeze.

Over the years he has learned to perform minor operations himself, relying on London veterinarians to handle more complicated procedures and treatments.

Dr. Susan McNabb from the Lambeth Animal Hospital has worked with wildlife for more than 30 years, and directly with Salt for the past 10 or 12. She sees very injured and sick creatures, and is often involved in decisions to euthanize those that are not candidates for rehabilitation and release. "It's hard," she says, "but it is [the] humane and moral thing to do."

Salthaven receives between 15 and 40 calls daily between April and October—more than 4,000 in total—from local veterinarians, police, London Humane Society, Animal Care and Control, Ministry of Natural Resources staff and concerned members of the public.

Both Salt and Dr. McNabb say that the number of calls has increased dramatically over the past eight years.

Salt believes the increase in numbers is mainly the result of wildlife losing their natural habitat due to the city's development and urban sprawl. Dr. McNabb feels it is also attributable to an increased public awareness and greater willingness to help.

Two years ago, seeing the number of wildlife needing help was rapidly increasing, Salt developed a five-year plan for Salthaven. Ultimately, he would like to establish a larger, better equipped facility in close proximity to London. An advisory board has been established, a planned half-million dollar facility has been designed, Salthaven Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Centre has been incorporated as a non-profit organization and is in the process of obtaining charitable status.

The current operation runs on a shoestring budget. Salt figures he spent about \$4,000 himself last year, and he relies on regular supporters and the public for donations to meet the never ending demand for food, syringes, latex gloves, and other supplies and equipment.

Currently Salthaven can only accommodate 10% of the birds and animals needing help. About 75% are successfully rehabilitated and released. There will always be some failures, and one of these is Brydget the red tail hawk. Brydget kept breaking flight feathers, and she has now lived at Salthaven for so long there is no hope she can live on her own. She has become an unofficial mascot and ambassador for Salthaven.

Part of Salthaven's mission is to educate and encourage people to live side by side with urban wildlife, instead of displacing them or treating them as pests. Salt is alarmed by what he sees happening not just in London but throughout Canada, noting that there are now close to 200 endangered species of wildlife across the country. He spends the off-season, from November to March, giving talks and presentations to the public, often accompanied by Brydget.

There are simple things we can do as individuals, says Salt. For example, raccoons are often viewed as pests, but a few basic steps can deter them from being a nuisance. Capping chimneys with mesh, securing loose soffit and siding, and ensuring there are no openings for raccoons to get into attics are simple ways of keeping raccoons from nesting where they are not wanted. Salt points out that the mother raccoon is only looking for a safe and comfortable place to have her babies. "As humans, we would do the same thing," he says.

Tight lids will keep animals out of garbage. Steel containers are recommended, since animals can easily chew through plastic lids.

And Salt strongly advocates the use of natural products instead of chemical pesticides and weed killers that leave a residue on lawns that is harmful to wildlife, causing severe respiratory and cardiac problems.

Humans are being affected too, he says, noting that upper respiratory conditions are more prevalent now. "Wildlife are a barometer for what is happening to the environment," says Salt, "similar to a canary in a coal mine."

Salt has always had help from friends and neighbours, and last year he recruited about 20 new volunteers to help out. This year there are 43 active volunteers, and the facility will require even more as the operation continues to expand.

Mike and Wendy Rowe have been neighbours and volunteers for the past three years. They spend six or eight hours a week at Salthaven, and they also foster baby raccoons at their own home. "We're here because we love animals and we want to try to reverse the negative impact people have had on them," says Mike.

Another active volunteer and avid Salthaven supporter is Kieron Twite. Earlier this year Twite, a local homeowner, managed to find Salthaven when he was frantically seeking help for a box turtle that had been injured by his dog. The turtle's shell was cracked and crushed at the front so it was unable to get its head out, and it was bleeding. "I'm an absolute animal lover, so I phoned everywhere. I was willing to pay for its treatment," says Twite, but the veterinarians he called didn't deal with reptiles. "I even called a place in Toronto and a reptile center in Guelph. All the feedback I was getting was there's not much you can do to help it." But when he called Salthaven, Salt offered to try to repair the damage. "He's very knowledgeable," says Twite. "He epoxied its shell and gave it injections, and he even called me the next day to let me know that the turtle was going to be fine."

When Twite found out that Salthaven had lost two birds of prey because they don't have a proper pre-release pen, he decided to donate materials and labour to build one, as well as some badly needed squirrel cages. He has nothing but praise for Salthaven and is impressed by the dedication and passion of Salt and his army of volunteers. "The experience has been very rejuvenating," says Twite.

Two other volunteers handle incoming phone calls and deal with some situations themselves. In the spring, for example, people who call about earth-bound nestlings are educated about what is normal. "When baby birds first leave the nest, they are unable to fly and will spend four to five days on the ground," says Salt. "It's their highest mortality period—nature's way of keeping the bird population in check."

Salt believes that volunteers will continue to be the driving force behind the Centre, although, "there would be wisdom in having a full-time veterinarian on staff." As for his future role, Salt says, "my objective is to make myself obsolete," but he recognizes that isn't going to happen right away. Once Salthaven's charitable status is confirmed, Salt hopes to encourage more donations and to move forward with his vision for a larger, permanent home for the Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Centre. After all, he's got another three years left in the five-year plan, and a lot of wildlife to look after. **END**

At press time, Salt had been told by staff at revenue Canada that charitable status would be issued by the end of December, 2004. For more information Salthaven, or to make a donation, contact Brian Salt at 519-264-2440 or www.salthaven.org

