



LIFESTYLES

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'Little Miss Doolittle' doing big things for wildlife

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"Little Miss Doolittle" may be grown up, but she has not outgrown her love of animals.

"I have been an animal lover since birth," Birgit Sommer, director of Rainbow Wildlife Rescue in Stephenville, said Thursday. "My grandfather started calling me 'Little Miss Doolittle' when I was about five years old."

While she has not outgrown the moniker given to her years ago, Sommer is quickly outgrowing the rescue's current location, nestled in the heart of the city in her own backyard. Sommer said she has big dreams of one day moving Rainbow to a ranch outside the city so she can open her sanctuary to animals too big for the current accommodations.

She is confident that with the ongoing support of other area animal lovers and by raising funds and awareness, that dream will become a reality.

Rehabilitation

Despite the size of the current facility, Sommer said she has taken in 180 orphaned and injured animals this year alone, but for Sommer even more staggering is the estimated 600-700 animals she could not offer a safe haven. She said while she had to turn away the critters, she did provide assistance by offering tips on caring for the animals' immediate needs, and advised that the animal should be taken to a wildlife rehabilitator that could provide a temporary home.

But Sommer knows that area residents looking for another rehabilitator might have a long road to travel in their search.

"That is one reason I will never leave Erath County," Sommer said. "Because there is nobody else to care for the wildlife."

To date, she said she has taken in animals from 40 counties, including a young jack rabbit, appropriately named "Jack," from nearby Brown County, which was delivered last week.

For the pint-sized rabbit, rehabilitation may be a long road because it was not raised in its natural habitat and is now too tame to battle the great outdoors.

When it comes to rehabilitation, Sommer is licensed through the State of Texas and is authorized to care for sick, injured or orphaned small mammals, excluding fawn, but cannot rehabilitate animals that are categorized as threatened or endangered species or those that fall under the health department's statewide rabies quarantine, such as foxes or coyotes.

In addition to the jack rabbit, Sommer is caring for two young, female raccoons named "Radar" and "Erdi," who were orphaned as babies and will soon be returned to the wild, and a partially-paralyzed male opossum, named "Bubba," who will be transferred to another facility to care for his special needs. She said about 90 percent of the animals she takes in are orphaned, and also said with autumn just around the corner, she is expecting a slew of orphaned squirrels to come knocking.

Thanks to the hard work of local Boy Scouts, each animal has a sizable structure to serve as their temporary abode, which provide all of the comforts found outdoors. Sommer hopes an enclosed structure constructed by scouts will soon welcome birds to the facility.

Sommer said living in a rural community that is home to many animal lovers has allowed her to establish a strong network of supporters, and animal advocates who allow her to release indigenous species back into their environments, away from her city-based sanctuary.

Since the animals have been rescued, the law states that they cannot be displayed to the public, but thanks to technology, Sommer is working to put their daily lives in plain sight without compromising the healing process by installing video cameras that will allow her to stream their daily activities into classrooms.

"Kids really only get to see wildlife dead

on the side of the road, or after they have been hunted," Sommer said. "All we need is the software and I can give children the opportunity to view the animals (in action)."

Education

Sommer said her mission is two-fold. In addition to rehabilitation, her focus is education. A new permanent resident of Rainbow, a female coatimundi, will help Sommer in making humans more aware of the risks of taking "exotics" on as pets.

"Snookums," will remain the only permanent resident of the rescue, as she was the product of an exotic breeder, far from South America, the home place of her species. In addition, Snookums was declawed by her former owners, who kept her in their kitchen in cramped quarters, a parrot cage. To be certain that she will never be bred in the case that Sommer can no longer care for her, Snookums was recently spayed by a local veterinarian as a precaution.

When asked how Snookums made her way to Rainbow, Sommer said she found an individual attempting to sell the coatimundi on craigslist for \$700. After a little negotiating, Sommer was able to get the price down to something more reasonable and a close friend volunteered to drive all the way to Louisiana to save Snookums from her inadequate home.

In her attempts to educate the masses on the problems with taking the wild out of wildlife, Sommers plans to take the message to area schools, clubs and organizations. Since Snookums is an educational tool, rather than a rehab animal, she will be able to be taken from Rainbow and viewed by anyone interested in her cute, but strange appearance. She looks like a cross between an anteater, raccoon and lemur.

Sommer also said in regards to local wildlife, such as squirrels or raccoons, it is a crime to keep such animals as domestic pets or for individuals who are not licensed rehabilitators to raise them. She said the offense is a misdemeanor that can add up to a citation and fine.

R.E.A.L. world experience

According to Denise Martinez, Ph.D., Sommer's mission will soon get a little help from animal science and social work students at Tarleton State University. Martinez is the coordinator for Keeping it R.E.A.L. (Real-world Experiences Applied to Learning,) a program that "is designed to enhance undergraduate education by integrating applied learning experiences into the students' educations."

Martinez said the program, under the direction of instructors Dr. Barry Lambert and Ms. Francine Pratt, will partner with Rainbow on the service learning project. Students will assist Sommer with facility operation, community education, fundraising and public relations.

"This is a great opportunity for us (Tarleton and TSU students)," Martinez said, adding that Rainbow's applying to the program means students could volunteer to participate in the service learning project.

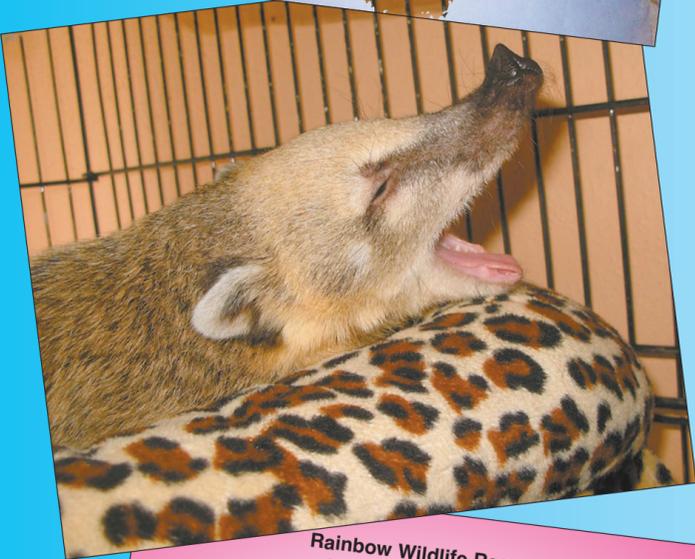
You can help

Sommer said while animals are her focus, 95 percent of her work revolves around paperwork and fundraising efforts. She receives no funding from the state and instead relies on the support of her friends and other animal lovers. Donations to the cause are accepted through the Rainbow Web site, www.rainbowwildlife.com. On the Web site is a wish list of things that will help care for wildlife.

Rainbow Wildlife Rescue is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization and all donations are tax deductible.

You may also get a peek into the rescue's operations and keep up-to-date on new patients by becoming a fan of the Rainbow Wildlife Rescue on facebook.

For more information, call Sommer at 254-968-4629 or e-mail help@rainbowwildlife.com.



**Rainbow Wildlife Rescue
2009 By the numbers**

- 221 - Number of animals admitted last year
- 187 - Number successfully released
- 40 - Number counties served in 2009
- 20 - Average number of phones calls received on a daily basis
- 100 - Average number of phone calls received in the spring time, when most babies need help.
- 15,000 - Estimated dollars spent last year to fund the rescue
- 60 - Percent of funds raised by rescue director Birgit Sommer in 2009
- 40 - Percent of the funds donated by other animal lovers

Photos contributed



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