

INTO THE WILD

FRESNO WILDLIFE REHABILITATION

CATHY GARNER has been involved with local wildlife for several decades now, educating the community on how important native animals are to the environment. In the early 1970s, Garner was a docent at the local zoo and junior museum, but at one point the zoo deemed that it was too dangerous to bring wildlife onto the campuses due to the threat of diseases. The junior museum also decided to focus on a different area of science rather than native wildlife. Therefore, many young, displaced animals were euthanized because there was nowhere else for them to go. Some of the docents applied for state and federal permits to open a rehabilitation center for wounded animals, and Garner was granted permission to proceed.

She opened the Fresno Wildlife Rehabilitation Service in 1974 and since then has saved thousands of animals, including hummingbirds, predatory mammals, deer and birds of prey. The rehab center cares for 400 to 1,200 animals per year and releases them back into the wild. However, for the severely injured animals that wouldn't survive if released, the federal government requires that they are put to work – if they continue to be in someone else's care, they have to serve a purpose. Therefore, the ambassador program was born.

"We have a bald eagle, a vulture, several owls, hawks and falcons," Garner says, adding that the animal ambassadors work just as hard as their human counterparts educating the community on what their roles are in society.

"All of our programs are free, and we are doing our best to keep it that way so all classes have access," Garner says. Since the rehab center does its best to align its demonstrations with the California science education standards, teachers love the program too, and the center caters demonstrations to appropriate age levels.

"When do they pray?" a second-grader asks Garner about a "bird of prey" present during a school presentation. The question prompted Garner to not only teach kids about what birds of prey do, but she also explains the difference between the words "pray" and "prey."

"The initial goal (of the rehab service) was to be an outreach to schools that are underserved. I enjoy going to rural schools and meeting kids who have never had the opportunity to learn about the animals in their area and talk about what makes them unusual and why they deserve our respect," she says.





"We're in a big agriculture community, so we talk a lot about the barn owl, the farmer's best friend. Most kids get that because their families work in the field, and we talk about how these animals help their parents do their job. The kids are fascinated with that. I'll make sounds of an American kestrel, and see their little faces light up and say, 'I hear that in my backyard!'" Garner says.

The center has a 90 percent success rate of releasing baby animals back into the wild, but unfortunately during the "injury season," mainly the fall and winter, some come in with severe injuries and can't be released back out into the wild. Along with being ambassadors, the rehab center's owls even helped scientists develop the cochlear implant – a device that helps people with their sense of sound. "We felt good about that. Even though the owls were being sacrificed, they would've been anyway if we couldn't find another place for them to go. So many people have benefited from that apparatus," Garner says.

Springtime is the center's busiest time of the year as the service gets around 40 calls a day from people who've found helpless baby animals.

"Many times, we just have to coax people to put the babies back in the nest," Garner says. "If there's one thing I'd like to undo, it's the old wives' tale that everyone believes that if you touch a baby animal, the mom won't take it back. That couldn't be farther from the truth; mommies always want their babies back. We coach people on that reunification process. Say a baby fell out of a nest in a windstorm. You can take a laundry basket and line it with cloth, then tie it to the tree as high as you can and as close to the nest as possible with the baby in it. Before you know it, the mom is right there using that artificial nest." •

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Hours: Monday-Friday, 10 am – 2 pm; open most Saturdays

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Photos courtesy of Fresno Wildlife Rehabilitation

