

Otisfield rehabber gives orphaned wildlife second chance

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A rescued fawn in Otisfield. Wildlife rehabilitator Katrina Lewis Carstensen has cared for six orphaned fawns this summer. *Submitted photo*

OTISFIELD — Katrina Lewis Carstensen has always been surrounded by unusual animals.

Her grandfather had a farm where he raised a menagerie of birds such as swans and pheasants. Her father and brother were both game wardens who picked up orphaned or injured animals. Carstensen helped care for them, gaining a reputation as the person who will not give up on an injured critter when someone else might.

“I don’t write them off,” she said. “I would splint broken legs. Friends would bring hurt animals to me, then more people started doing it, too.”

Finally, in 2016 Carstensen decided to make it official and became a certified wildlife rehabilitator through the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

According to state wildlife biologist Scott Lindsay, rehabilitators are an important partner in caring for young orphaned or injured animals.

“It takes a lot of training for people to become certified,” Lindsay said. “They must follow state policies for the care of these animals and provide annual reports on their activities. Much of what they do is self-taught and it requires a big commitment.

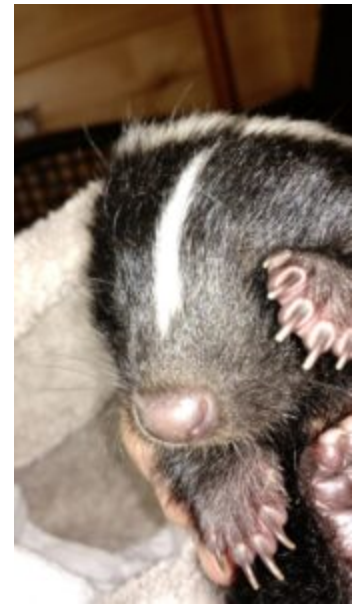
“Rehabilitation sites vary, from individuals who care for a few animals in their garage to fully staffed facilities like the Center for Wildlife in Cape Neddick and Avian Haven in Freedom,” she said.

Carstensen’s specialties are fawns and smaller mammals – woodchucks, skunks, squirrels and porcupines. She also cares for migratory birds, which requires a federal permit. She is one of only four rehabilitators statewide who is equipped to care for deer.

While an injured animal might find its way to Carstensen’s home anytime of the year, spring – newborn season – is when she is busiest. She will take five or six calls in a single day. Fortunately, most of those calls do not require her services beyond educating the concerned citizen on the other end.

“The first thing we do is just ask a series of questions,” Carstensen said. “When did they first see the animal? If it’s been an hour, I instruct them to leave it alone. In most cases the mother will return for it and knows exactly where she left it.

“If the animal is just curled up asleep it is not distressed, but if it’s lying on its side it may be injured. A fawn whose ears are curled or keeps bleating is likely dehydrated,” she said. “If it has been hanging around your yard for a couple of days or has no fear of humans, than we will figure out intervention.”



A neonate skunk in rehabilitation. Caregiver Katrina Lewis-Carstensen said even the youngest skunks are capable of spraying. “We call it ‘poofing,’” she said. *Submitted photo*



This endangered lynx kitten was picked up by well-meaning hikers near Mount Kathadin. Now he must spend the first year of his life in wildlife rehabilitation before he can be released back into the wild. *Submitted photo*

Intervention involves dispatching a game warden or biologist like Lindsay to observe and, if necessary, retrieve the animal. But officials have many other demands on their time and cannot always respond as quickly as good Samaritans want. Permitted rehabilitators in Maine are not required to provide transportation, although Carstensen will do it when she can.

Other rehabbers sometimes taxi orphans from one location to another for each other and Avian Haven, the bird rehabilitation facility in Freedom, has a wide network of volunteers who transport animals in need of care. A rehabilitator recently drove five hours from Penobscot County to bring Carstensen a lynx kitten for which she did not have the proper set-up.

“Officially, the lynx is being called an ‘unidentified cat,’” Carstensen said. “He was picked up by people hiking around Mount Kahtadin. They didn’t know what he was – they’re so rare – and brought him home. Then they called to find out what to do with it.

"The rehabber he was turned over to didn't have the right set-up to care for him so she had to drive all the way down here with him in her car to my house," Carstensen said. "And when he is ready for release, I will probably be the one to drive him all the way back, a five-hour trip."

Because lynx are dependent on their mothers for their first year to survive, Carstensen will have to keep him through the winter. Right now he is eating a half a rabbit a day, not a cheap diet by any means.

The job of a wildlife rehabilitator for orphans is to feed them until they are big enough to make it on their own, usually not more than eight weeks. Carstensen does not bond with the animals; as soon as they are weaned they revert to their natural behavior.

"When they see you coming with their bottle they are happy to see you, but once they start eating solids they want nothing to do with you," she said. "They don't want you near them."

Wildlife rehabilitators are volunteers and cover the expense of their services themselves. This summer Carstensen has already spent more than \$600 on milk replacer and specialized pellets for the six fawns she is caring for. She is allowed to accept donations but is not allowed to ask the individuals who rescue the orphans and injured animals she cares for any fee compensation.

"I maintain a "wish list" on Amazon that people can order and donate to me," she said. "Things like gloves, animal snack foods, syringes and supplies like that. There is also an online store, Chris' Squirrels, that only sells feed and supplies for rehabbing wildlife. They run specials on stuff when they can."

In Maine, white-tail deer are typically the largest wildlife animals that are rehabbed. They, along with squirrels, woodchucks, porcupines and skunks are the most commonly saved animals. The lynx in Carstensen's care is extremely unusual; it is rare for predators to be caught no matter how young.

"I have only heard of one coyote that was sent to a rehabilitator," Lindsay said. "We don't often take in animals like martens, fishers, or bobcats. It is more the young wildlife that lives comfortably close to human communities that we are likely to see."

"There is no way I can rehabilitate an adult wild animal," Carstensen said. "If it is injured and needs surgery it likely will not survive the anesthesia. An animal that survives being hit by a car or a domestic dog attack usually ends up dying of the shock of being handled by a human."



A young fawn in the care of Otisfield wildlife rehabilitator Katrina Lewis Carstensen. Maine wildlife biologists are releasing six orphaned fawns this week. *Submitted photo*

There is only one large game rehabilitator in the state who is equipped to take in black bear cubs.

"There are 45-50 rehabilitators statewide and we all have different specialties," Carstensen said. "There are so many rules for each species. I don't typically take care of raccoons because the rabies requirements are pretty strict."

Because raccoons are considered rabies vectors, rehabilitation for them includes a two-week quarantine period from all other animals and close observation for symptoms or behaviors associated with the virus. Lindsay said rehabilitators of raccoons have to take extra precautions for their own safety as well as that of any other animals at the facility.

If May and June are the most demanding times to take in wildlife for rehabilitation, late summer is busy as the animals are released back into the wild.

"We try to get them back out on their own before hunting seasons start, to give them a chance to establish themselves and forget human connections," Lindsay said. "We want them to have time to feed on their own and prep for winter."

Catching weaned animals, even in fenced quarters, is not easy and has to be done quickly.

"We try and make it as a low-stress procedure as possible," Lindsay said. "The animals have to be put into wooden crates for transport. If one resists we have to be patient, give it a break to calm down. Occasionally we may have to dart it but we prefer not to."

The animals are always brought to new territories, well away from where they were originally found and from anywhere inhabited by people. The six fawns Lindsay is releasing from Carstensen's care this week will be dropped in two separate locations.

"We're doing it in two groups," Carstensen explained. "Splitting up the more dominant ones, which will make it easier to form a new hierarchy and improve their chances for survival."

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