

Beautiful Beasts

PORTRAITS AND STORIES OF SOME OF THE INCREDIBLE ANIMALS
WHO RESIDE AT BUSCH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

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HANNIBAL THE BALD EAGLE

In 2015, a volunteer for Audubon EagleWatch had been monitoring a nest in Okeechobee County and came across an injured eagle. The eagle arrived at Busch Wildlife Sanctuary, and the medical team found he was covered in scabs and had damage to his eyes, with a huge growth under one of them. After testing, they discovered he had cancer (squamous cell carcinoma). He was just 6 weeks old. Doctors removed the growth and, thankfully, the cancer has not returned. Hannibal ended up losing the eye as a result of the damage, but he is otherwise healthy and happy and living in the sanctuary's avian ambassador mew house.

TAHMAHLAH THE MOUNTAIN LION

In 2015, after a series of wildfires in California, some people were out looking for dogs left behind when they came upon Tahmahlah. They notified wildlife officials, who took him to a hospital in California where it was determined his eyes and paws were too damaged and he could no longer live in the wild. His paws were so severely burned in the fires, he lost feeling in them. The word went out to find a new, safe home for Tahmahlah, and Busch took him in. He is around 5 years old, weighs about 122 pounds, and feasts on meat, chicken, fish, and even rats. His habitat—which includes an indoor sleeping and eating area and an outdoor yard—is situated next to Makaya the Florida panther.



FREDDY THE ALLIGATOR

Freddy came to Busch not long after it opened, back in the Eighties. A young boy had been out fishing with his dad in Miami when he wandered off and found an egg. Without telling his father, he took it home and hatched it—prematurely. He was excited to have a new baby “lizard” pet, which he kept in a shoebox under his bed. The following week, when the boy was at school, his mom was in his room cleaning when she found the baby alligator. Since the gator was underdeveloped and had spent no time with its mother to learn the ropes of being a gator, Busch deemed her unreleasable and moved her into a permanent habitat at the sanctuary, where she is now an education ambassador and fills her belly with everything from fish to chicken to rats.



MO THE BARRED OWL

In August 2020, a woman named Monique, who works for Harmony Animal Hospital, encountered an injured owl in Martin County that had clearly been hit by a car. She brought him to Busch, where doctors ended up having to remove his left eye because of the trauma. With only one eye, Mo can no longer successfully hunt in the wild, so he remains at the sanctuary, where he is an education ambassador and lives in the avian ambassador mew house. Barred owls get their name from the striped feather patterns found on their chests. Mo was named after his rescuer, Monique.





BUCKSHOT THE CRESTED CARACARA

Buckshot arrived at Busch in November 2018, after his rescuer found him in Martin County. He had been illegally shot with a BB gun, and the pellets shattered his wrist. Now an education ambassador, he resides in the avian ambassador mew with the others. Known as the “Mexican eagle,” caracaras are actually part of the falcon family and are scavengers.

Wild at Heart

Visitors to the sanctuary come to admire all the animals strutting around their enclosures. But few ever see what’s going on behind the scenes, particularly in the on-site hospital. The mission of the organization is to rehabilitate injured wildlife and release recovered patients back into their natural habitats—which they did hundreds of times last year alone. Only when an animal cannot recover enough to survive in the wild does it become a permanent resident of the sanctuary, where it may become an “animal ambassador” serving in Busch’s many educational programs. The hospital comprises full-time doctors, seasonal nursery keepers, and volunteers, who treat every animal that is brought through the door. Last year alone, the hospital treated nearly 6,000 animal injuries, most of which were directly related to man-made causes like being hit by a car, illegally shot, or kept as personal pets. Screech owlets found themselves orphaned when their “home tree” was cut down by landscapers. A snapping turtle was hit by a car—carrying 23 eggs. Opossum babies came in, orphaned after their mom was strangled by a soda can ring. There are countless sad stories. The most common species people brought into the hospital last year were opossum and Eastern cottontail rabbits, but the staff treated all kinds of mammals, reptiles, birds, and amphibians. If you find a sick or injured animal, please call the hospital’s emergency line for assistance: 561.575.3399.



SCAR THE RAT SNAKE

Scar was found in Jupiter in 2015, all tangled up in a soccer net. The netting was wound so tightly around his body, he ended up with permanent scarring (thus the name). At Busch, he lives in the sanctuary’s serpentarium, which houses about 12 various species of snakes, each in its own space. Rat snakes are nonvenomous and often kept as pets. Farmers gave them the nickname “corn snake” because of the checkered pattern on their belly that resembles an ear of corn.

EARL THE FLYING SQUIRREL

Little Earl, for reasons unknown, was kept as a pet by an elderly woman for years. When the woman ended up moving into a nursing home, Earl was on his own and arrived at Busch. The staff noticed he was happiest around people when he was in the hospital, so that is where he lives full-time at the sanctuary today. He’s tiny—about the size of the palm of your hand—and très adorable! Flying squirrels sort of “glide” from tree to tree with a parachute-like membrane (called a “patagia”) and snack on fungi, nuts, berries, seeds, and even small birds.





MAKAYA THE FLORIDA PANTHER

Before moving to the sanctuary, Makaya spent her life being trotted around Ohio by humans who sold photo ops with the then cub. In 2009, someone was attempting to illegally smuggle her into Florida to sell her on the black market, but authorities discovered and confiscated her at Palm Beach International Airport. Eleven-year-old, 88-pound Makaya now lives at Busch full-time, in a habitat right next door to Tahmahlah the mountain lion. Like Tahmahlah, she also eats meat and fish, though she is allergic to chicken! Recognized as the official state animal of Florida, the panther is one of the most endangered mammals on Earth, with only about 120 to 130 estimated to be left in the wild.



TEHYA THE BLACK BEAR

Tehya shares a habitat at Busch with her sister, Kiona—two cuties with a very unfortunate backstory. In 2008, their mom was repeatedly making her way into urban neighborhoods in Apopka, prompting the State to label her a safety risk and, sadly, euthanize the poor mama bear. Tehya and Kiona were cubs at the time, and the State worried they too would become a threat to humans, having learned habits from their mom. They did not want the cubs to remain in the wild, but luckily local organizations came to the rescue. Palm Beach Zoo took them in temporarily while Busch began building a permanent habitat for the sisters. In 2010, they moved into their new digs, which include an indoor facility with two bedrooms and a kitchen, plus a 2,500-square-foot day yard with a pool and basking platforms (which is where you'll usually find them!).

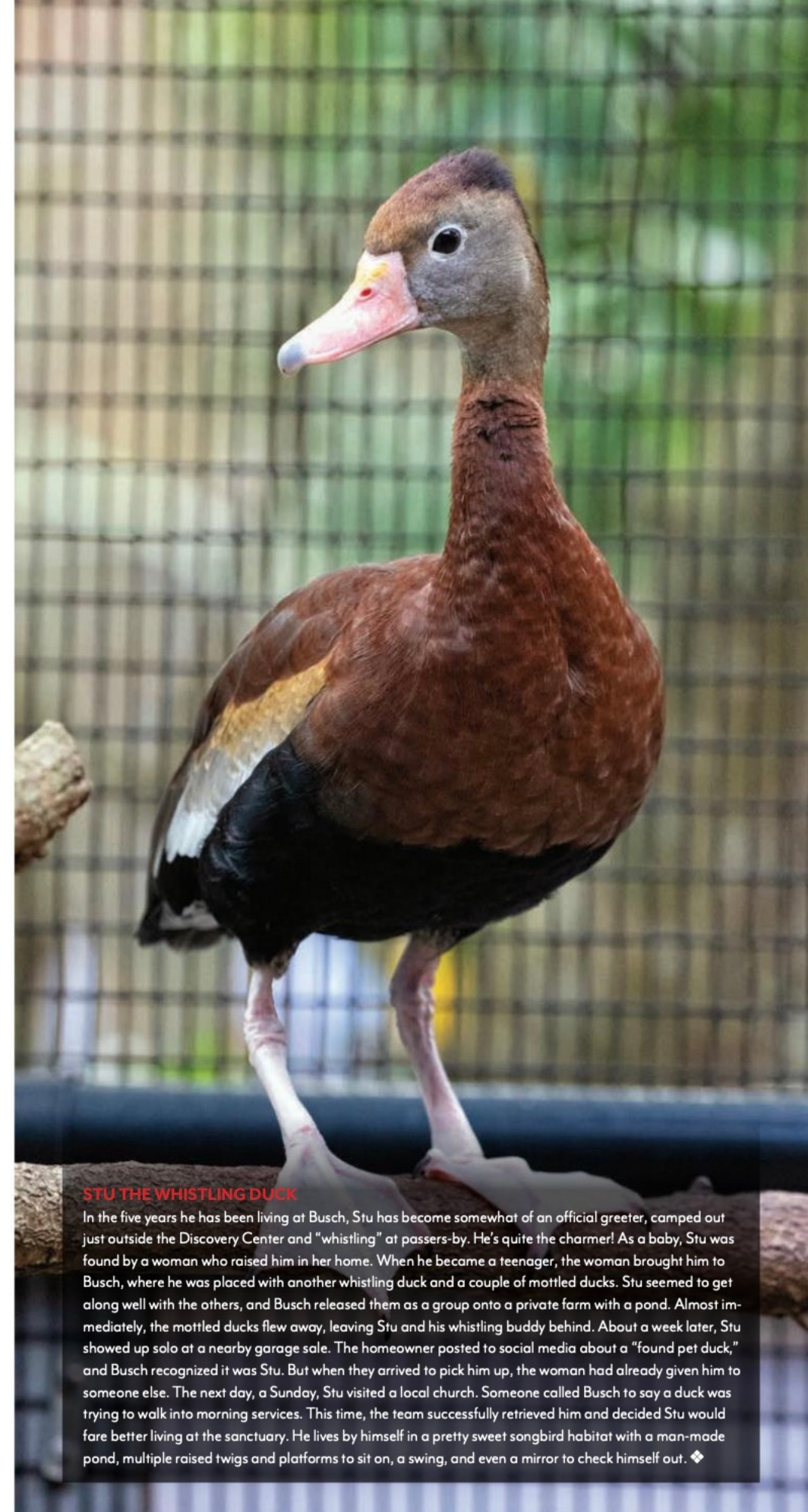


NUBS THE WHITE-TAILED DEER

It's close to impossible to get anywhere near a deer in the woods—they typically run from humans. Not the case with Nubs! He's gentle, caring, and friendly with people because he was actually kept as a pet (in a garage) as a baby. The staff at Busch says this often happens when someone finds a fawn sleeping under ground cover or a bush, assumes its mom has abandoned it, and takes it home. The reality is, a mother doe hides her babies under camouflage during the day to keep them safe while she goes off to forage. Fortunately, a neighbor who spied Nubs in the garage called the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and officers confiscated the deer. Nubs now lives at the sanctuary with his deer pals, Daffodil and Moose.

On the Move

For the first time in its nearly 40-year history in the area, Busch Wildlife Sanctuary is getting ready to hit the road. The organization has purchased new land in Jupiter Farms, on the southwest corner of Rocky Pines and Indiantown Road, where it will build out a brand new campus for its resident animals, education center, hospital, and more. "As we see between an 8- to 10-percent increase in animal patients every year, we realize we must expand," says Executive Director Amy Kight. "The sanctuary is currently built on about 6 acres, and our new site is just over 19 acres, allowing us to triple our size." For years, Busch has been leasing its current property from the Loxahatchee River District, but that agreement is set to expire. Kight says the goal is to have the new facility completed and move-in ready by March 2022: "Our build will feature larger habitats for our permanent animal ambassadors, as well as more space and enclosures to prepare our wildlife patients for a successful reintroduction to their natural ecosystems." Busch is launching a capital campaign to help raise funding for the build—a \$13 million project. You can learn more about the plans and donate to the campaign by visiting buschwildlife.org/capital-campaign.



STU THE WHISTLING DUCK

In the five years he has been living at Busch, Stu has become somewhat of an official greeter, camped out just outside the Discovery Center and "whistling" at passers-by. He's quite the charmer! As a baby, Stu was found by a woman who raised him in her home. When he became a teenager, the woman brought him to Busch, where he was placed with another whistling duck and a couple of mottled ducks. Stu seemed to get along well with the others, and Busch released them as a group onto a private farm with a pond. Almost immediately, the mottled ducks flew away, leaving Stu and his whistling buddy behind. About a week later, Stu showed up solo at a nearby garage sale. The homeowner posted to social media about a "found pet duck," and Busch recognized it was Stu. But when they arrived to pick him up, the woman had already given him to someone else. The next day, a Sunday, Stu visited a local church. Someone called Busch to say a duck was trying to walk into morning services. This time, the team successfully retrieved him and decided Stu would fare better living at the sanctuary. He lives by himself in a pretty sweet songbird habitat with a man-made pond, multiple raised twigs and platforms to sit on, a swing, and even a mirror to check himself out. ♦