

# A wild life at Misfits Rehab

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July 21, 2019



A small skunk enjoys country living at Misfits Rehab in Auburn. Andree Kehn/Sun Journal

AUBURN — Jennifer Marchigiani lives with wildlife.

There is Pokey, the baby porcupine delivered by an emergency C-section on the side of the road by the driver who had accidentally hit his mother.

There is Percy, the elderly opossum left for dead after his tail was cut off.

There are bats so tiny two can fit in the palm of Marchigiani's hand, and a 3-month-old beaver who snuffles like a human baby in her arms.



Paulie the porcupine has a cookie at the Misfits Rehab in Auburn. Andree Kehn/Sun Journal

About 40 animals now live with Marchigiani on Garfield Road, including a recently arrived baby skunk that was injured in a kill trap meant for rats.

Marchigiani, a 46-year-old wildlife rehabilitator, is almost constantly needed at her nonprofit Misfits Rehab, so vacations — or even days off — are out. She spends her own money on food, medical care and other necessities. She gets the joy that comes with returning an animal to the wild, but she also has to deal the heartbreak when things go wrong.

Still, she cannot imagine doing anything else.

“How can you not love them?” Marchigiani asked as Paulie, another young porcupine, took a treat from her hand and, clutching it between its front paws, happily nibbled away.

Born and raised in Maine, Marchigiani was always what she called an “animal geek.”

“I was the little girl that would run outside crying because the worms were drowning in the mud puddles, and I would have to pick them up and put them on the grass,” she said.



Jennifer Marchigiani peers into the raccoon enclosure at the Misfits Rehab that she runs behind her home in Auburn. *Andree Kehn/Sun Journal*

As an adult, she held a variety of jobs, all of them involving animals. In Idaho, she worked for a few years as a zookeeper. In Maine, she helped run pet stores and worked as a vet tech for an emergency clinic.

In 2002, she became a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Her first case did not end well. Marchigiani was overprotective, she said, and tried too hard to keep the baby red squirrel warm. The animal overheated and died.

“I was like: ‘I’m not cut out for this! I can’t do it!’” Marchigiani said.

Her mentor, the late wildlife rehabilitator Caryl Widdowson in Gray, encouraged her not to give up.

“She was like, ‘If that one life is lost, you learn a lesson, you try not to repeat the same mistake and you carry on because there’s always going to be more that need your help,’” Marchigiani said.

“I pass that on (to new wildlife rehabilitators) because it’s so true. If I have one animal that dies in my care, I turn my head and I have three dozen more that I have to go feed and clean. It’s like, I can’t just say ‘I’m done’ because what am I going to do with all these others?”



A pair of baby opossums live together at Misfits Rehab in Auburn. Andree Kehn/Sun Journal

Today, Marchigiani runs Misfits Rehab out of a house in Auburn. At times, she has lived with 50 or more wild animals.

She sometimes gets her animals from an animal control officer, game warden or other authority. Other times, they come directly from a member of the public, usually the person who found them.

Over the years, she has cared for almost every kind of animal native to Maine, “except for the really big guys.” She once had a coyote. She regularly gets raccoons, squirrels, groundhogs, opossums and skunks. She has cared for hummingbirds, foxes, porcupines and beavers.

Bats are Marchigiani’s forte, a specialty that arose when she realized no one else in the area knew how to care for them. She did not know how to care for them either, not in the beginning, but she researched and connected with bat experts from around the country.

A 10-day “Bat World Boot Camp” in Texas gave her more training and cemented her passion for the animals.

“I loved it,” Marchigiani said. “I actually ended up going back the next year to help with the following class.”

Marchigiani has had so many animals that she has come to notice patterns: Opossums are “crazy smart.” Porcupines are vocal and sweet. Groundhogs can go one of two ways: “The sweetest thing to rehab or completely psycho.”

“There’s no middle ground,” she said. “They’re either going to be like, ‘Pat my tummy and feed me yummys’ or ‘Look at me and I’m going to kill you.’”

Almost all of Marchigiani’s animals are released into the wild if they recover or once they grow old enough to fend for themselves.

Misfits Rehab became an official nonprofit last year, opening it to more grant possibilities. Marchigiani also has a small cadre of dedicated volunteers and receives donations, including, recently, a large galvanized tub so the 3-month-old beaver, Wally, could have a better place to splash around.

But most of Misfits Rehab’s work, and its costs, fall to Marchigiani.

“Credit cards are wonderful,” she said with a laugh.

Her advice to people who find an injured or orphaned animal: Wear gloves if you need to pick up the animal or touch it, because the state will euthanize and test any rabies-prone species that a human has touched with bare skin. Do not feed the animal until an expert says it is OK. Do not treat the animal based on Google research.

And call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

That is what one woman did recently when she found a baby skunk seriously injured by a trap she had set out to kill rats. Marchigiani already had almost two dozen skunks, but she was not about to turn away this one.

“What’s one more?” Marchigiani said, then heading off to meet her newest resident.

*Animal Tales is a recurring Sun Journal feature about animals and their people.*

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Lewiston rolling out a trash and image campaign

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