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Journey of love: A CT woman went from concerned citizen to certified wildlife rehabilitator



Jessica Bucholz, of Wildhearts Animal Rehabilitation and Opie.



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Jessica Bucholz puts her heart into saving wildlife.

Her work as a state-certified wildlife rehabilitator is done on a volunteer basis and through [Wildhearts Animal Rehabilitation](#) in Middletown.

It all started years ago, when she came upon an injured baby fox, she said.

"He appeared to have a broken leg, likely from being hit by a car. My heart broke for this poor baby, as cars continued to pass by around him. Using a blanket from my car, I gently scooped him up and got him to safety," she said.

While she now has been a state-certified wildlife rehabilitator for six years, at the time she found the fox she had been a pet sitter, whose business, [Paw Prints](#), is located in Middletown.

Her motivation to protect and rehabilitate wildlife was a journey from concerned citizen to certified wildlife rehabilitator, she said. Wildlife rehabilitators go to great lengths, largely at their own expense, to save injured and compromised creatures, she said.

In dealing with the baby fox, also known as a kit, she did lots of research on Google and identified a veterinarian who "agreed to treat his injuries and then place the young fox with a wildlife rehabilitator until he was strong enough for release.

"That was my first time learning about wildlife rehabilitation, and I knew instantly that I wanted to become a licensed rehabilitator," she said.

In order to become certified, Bucholz said, she followed the state of [Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection requirements](#). "I began apprenticing with other licensed rehabbers," she said. Bucholz also completed a one-day course that the state offers annually, followed by an exam, she said. A minimum of 40 hours of apprenticeship are required.

"I also found a veterinarian who was willing to sign on to assist me with wildlife treatment as-needed," such as for medications like antibiotics and anti-inflammatories, as well as providing general guidance, she said. Connecting with a veterinarian is part of the required process.

"About a year after deciding to become a wildlife rehabilitator, I had my certification to rehab small mammals," she said.

A variety of wildlife have been treated over the past six years.

"I have cared primarily for squirrels, opossums, bunnies and mice," Bucholz said, noting her future plans include expanding her efforts.

"I am currently working towards becoming an RVS ([rabies-vector species](#)) certified rehabber, so that I can care for raccoons, foxes and skunks," she said. "Because these species can potentially carry the rabies virus, special immunizations and specific caging is required to care for them."

For now, many animals show up on her doorstep through [the DEEP website](#) or a Facebook group where wildlife rehabilitation caregivers can communicate with one another about wildlife in need.

"Sometimes I'll find critters posted by other rehabbers that I am able to take in," Bucholz said. "The spring/summer are by far the busiest times to get calls, during baby season. Orphaned babies are the most common calls I get, followed by animals that were dog or cat caught."

About her favorite rehabilitation success story, Bucholz notes, "Opie. Opie was a baby opossum found crawling across the road. A good Samaritan got him to safety and I took him in for rehab a few hours later. He didn't appear to have feeling or use of his back legs."

Then, "we slowly started doing some water therapy, and he would kick his little legs as a reaction to being in water. As time went on and we continued therapy, his back legs became more and more functional until he was getting around quite well."

Unfortunately, Bucholz said, Opie remained "slow and unsteady at times, and it was eventually determined that despite his progress, he would not be able to survive on his own in the wild." Around the same time, she said, she received word that Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton was looking for an educational ambassador opossum and could provide a loving home for Opie. "I went for a meet and greet and he won them over instantly."



Kia, a red-tailed hawk, one of the raptures at Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton.
(Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

“Despite not being releasable, I still consider him one of my greatest success stories; he lived in the lap of luxury while teaching visitors about the docile nature of the often misunderstood opossum,” Bucholz said.

Jay Kaplan, director of [Roaring Brook Nature Center](#), said Opie’s mother had apparently been hit by a car and that he was injured as a result. Opie resided at the Roaring Brook Nature Center for a couple of years and was part of their nature education programming, Kaplan said..

Kaplan noted the current concern in state wildlife rehabilitation circles about House Bill 5217, a proposal to ban sale of second-generation anticoagulant [rodenticides](#). Kaplan said rodenticides use is “nondiscriminatory. It affects everything. It doesn’t matter who is using them – wildlife, cats, dogs” are all at risk.

Bucholz said that, in her six years of experience in the rehabilitation field, “a lot of wildlife displacement/injury is the result of human activity.” Recognizing the need for change due to the increased number of sick birds that have consumed rodents or other mammals that are considered “nuisance wildlife,” she said House Bill 5217 would help prevent needless deaths.

[Second generation anticoagulant rodenticides](#), or SGARs, used to kill nuisance wildlife, then passes to other animals through the food chain, Bucholz said.

“SGARs have been found to be the cause of death in many raptors, including federally protected bald eagles. Myself and other wildlife rehabilitators are hopeful that Connecticut lawmakers will vote in favor of banning SGARs, and prevent the needless suffering and death of our most majestic creatures,” Bucholz said.

Professional exterminators argue that the poisons are necessary to control infestations of rodents.

House Bill 5217 was voted out of the Environment Committee, then referred by the House to the Appropriations Committee, records show. Meanwhile, Bucholz continues her work along with other wildlife rehabilitation experts, specializing in healing small birds, hawks and owls, ducks and geese, certain small mammals, deer, bear, bobcats and coyotes, reptiles and amphibians, and more.



Conner, a Black Vulture, one of the raptures at Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton on Thursday Dec. 7, 2023. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

Anyone who encounters wildlife in need of help can contact [Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection](#) Dispatch at 860-424-3333 or search the website for certified wildlife rehabilitation professionals at: <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife/Rehabilitator/Dealing-with-Distressed-Wildlife>. Information on how to become a licensed wildlife rehabilitator is also available there.

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