



January 2008

Wildlife

The Wild Kingdom

Yggdrasil's TLC Sends Urban Critters Back Where They Belong



On a cozy couch, in a sunlit living room, Una, a minute one-eyed squirrel, nestles in Lila Travis' lap. Travis eases Una into a cage among a squirmy pile of fellow orphans and reaches into her bra, gently extracting another tiny fuzzy-tailed mammal. All this cuddling constitutes normal daily life for Travis, director of Yggdrasil Urban Wildlife Rescue, a rehab and education center, and for her husband, Richard Travis, busy in the kitchen mixing a batch of baby squirrel formula for the next feeding.

But make no mistake. Despite all this tender loving care, these are not household pets. They are wild animals in treatment, and if all goes as planned, these little critters will soon find themselves back in their native habitat.

For the past five years, the Travis team has operated YUWR on a shoestring budget and a strong commitment to the creatures that share the urban landscape. The name Yggdrasil (pronounced Ig-dra-sill) means World Tree in Norse mythology. According to legend, the World Tree's branches stretch across the universe. Some branches support the heavens while others sustain the earth. A snake, an eagle and four stags inhabit the tree. Ratatosk, the squirrel, carries messages and mischief, scampering between the Earth goddess and Sky god. All the lively inhabitants nourish the tree, and the tree supports them in return.

Yggdrasil, a tale of community interdependence, describes what the Travises discovered when,

inspired by interaction with children in their neighborhood, they launched their nonprofit from North Oakland. “Kids have always been attracted to us, and us to kids,” says Lila Travis (she and Richard Travis have no children of their own). Local kids came knocking with injured animals—opossums, for example—in tow. “A mother opossum can starve feeding her babies,” Lila Travis says. “Up to 13 babies are nursed in a mother opossum’s pouch while she is hunting for herself. Meeting her own nutritional needs, while making milk, can leave a mother weak and unable to secure food.” When youngsters living in low-income housing nearby located a starving mother, the Travises cared for the entire opossum family, feeding the mom while she nursed her babies.

Thrilled, not only with their rescue success, but also with the excitement of seeing urban kids “exposed to nature right outside their own front doors,” the Travises secured a rehab permit. Good thing, as opossums were only the first of a cascade of animals, including raccoons and squirrels, that soon followed.

This, however, was not the first up-close and personal wildlife experience for either Travis. At age 7, Lila Travis—recruited by her mother, a volunteer at the San Francisco Zoo—participated in the Trees Project, an enrichment program for baby orangutans. Lila Travis spent “one beautiful summer” climbing trees and sharing mealtimes with Thelma, an orphan orangutan. Thelma became one of Lila Travis’ all-time favorite playmates. The little girl and primate developed a special “cross-species friendship,” and Lila Travis’ path in life was set.

Building on an academic background of biology, physical anthropology and hours of specialized training, she is now a licensed wildlife rehab professional.

Richard Travis, too, has shared some intimate moments with the primates at the San Francisco Zoo. A wildlife artist, he welcomed the opportunity to work with Coco, the signing gorilla, as well as other apes. The Travises, introduced through a mutual friend and wildlife activist, discovered their shared passion for protecting the physical and emotional lives of all creatures.



Following their early success, expanding their wildlife rescue and rehab center was an obvious choice, necessitating a move to a larger, eucalyptus-cloaked refuge in the Oakland Hills. Here they orchestrate the rescue, rehab and release of close to 400 animals per year, operating on a budget dependent on donations and grants. Last year, funds of \$28,000 helped cover food, medicine, bedding, yard and cage maintenance and the cost of energy to run heating pads for mammals needing warmth as well as emotional comfort.

Fortunately for their bottom line, YUWR has formed an indispensable partnership with Montclair Veterinary Hospital, which has served as a drop-off point for urban wildlife for almost

40 years. Just about five years ago, “Lila and the hospital found each other,” says veterinarian Gary Richter, the hospital director. “It was mutual salvation.” Before YUWR, animals left at the Montclair vet were transported to the Lindsey Wildlife Museum in Walnut Creek. But transporting injured and traumatized animals long distances is risky when every minute counts.

Montclair Veterinary donates urgent and ongoing medical services. “We send Lila home with medication and follow up until the rescued animal is released back into the wild,” says Richter. And that is the goal—returning the opossums, raccoons and squirrels to their natural environment, where they play a crucial role. Opossums eat rats, snails and slugs. Raccoons consume mice and rats. But when it comes to rescue, rehab and release, Lila Travis is quick to admit, “My personal heart is with the squirrels. Squirrels are born gardeners. One squirrel planted the almonds that grew into a tree in our yard. Seventy percent of the world’s deciduous forests are planted by squirrels.”

Like most nonprofits, YUWR, which serves the cities of Oakland, Berkeley, Alameda and Piedmont, can use any and all help. Last year, volunteers from Rebuilding Together Oakland renovated outside enclosures and created new walkways easing access to animals housed on the hillside. And the Travises welcome volunteers from ages 8 to 80. “We have an 8-year-old neighbor who nurses our baby squirrels,” says Lila Travis. They also seek foster families who can devote their time and hearts to nurturing vulnerable charges.

They especially enjoy exploring the natural world with children, knowing nothing compares with one-on-one interaction with a fragile young animal. The Travises tell the story of two young boys aggressively digging a hole on a hill near the center. “They seemed like angry little boys. We asked them if they would like to help feed our baby deer. We told them, ‘You have to be quiet. You have to let them come to you.’ The little boys gasped and were so quiet and gentle with the deer. They were entranced. It was a transforming experience for them.”

One of the overarching goals of YUWR is to encourage respect and understand urban wildlife. “Squirrels, for example, are very emotionally developed,” says Lila Travis. “A squirrel will die from sadness at the loss of its mother. Besides food and warmth, baby squirrels need to be emotionally reassured.”



But the Travises urge extreme caution when approaching an apparently injured or abandoned animal. Especially with baby animals, they recommend looking for signs of mother nearby. Calling YUWR, or animal control, before handling the animal is strongly advised. Although some wildlife might be so desperate for help they appear tame, the Travises remind rescuers that the animals are indeed wild, with special and pressing needs in the first critical hours.

Recognizing and treasuring cross-species similarities and emotional bonds drew the Travises

into the world of urban wildlife rescue, rehab and release. Sharing, particularly with children, the experience of caring for wild animals and returning them to their native urban environments, continues to fuel the couple's passion. In addition to youthful volunteers (middle and high school students can earn community service hours), they also take educational programs to Oakland elementary schools in underprivileged areas.

Their operation is 24/7; they have not taken a vacation for six years. But their hard work is driven by their belief that, "You will not save something unless you love it, and how will you love it if you have never made contact?"

For dos and don'ts for handling injured or abandoned wildlife, contact Yggdrasil Urban Wildlife Rescue, www.yuwr.org, (510) 421-YUWR or (510) 547-YUWR. For information about wildlife rescue, rehab and release, contact Montclair Veterinary Hospital Pet & Wildlife Fund, www.petandwildlifefund.org, or Lee Richter, (510) 339-2400.

—By Noelle Robbins

—Courtesy of Yggdrasil Urban Wildlife Rescue