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SHADOW OF SONOMA MOUNTAIN

Living With the Animals by Ana Manwaring

MFoxy lives in the thicket of brambles along the creek bordering our property. He's a sleek grey fox with a rust-colored plume of a tail. Sometimes in early morning I see him trotting across our yard, breakfast dangling from his mouth—probably a gopher.

My husband and I think Foxy is the offspring of the critters we mistook for chupacabras a couple years back. Although they barked their raspy barks at us when we turned on a light or walked outside after dark during their residence, we noticed a distinct decrease in rodents turning up inside the house with the cat. But at the same time, we were alarmed by the frequency of rifle shots fired at night. Headline over the grapevine: one of the neighbors shot a fox. The foxes moved out and the

rodents returned as cat toys.

Our rural "estate" is densely populated with deer, owls, hawks, wild turkeys, native bees, orb spiders, Monarchs, Tiger Swallowtails, Anna's hummingbirds, Blue Jays, opossums, and lately a skunk and a grey squirrel. Isn't this just a nuisance, you might ask?

I work to accommodate the birds and the bees, and the reptiles and mammals, that bring me peace and joy, and my backyard habitat helps mitigate the negative effects of human land use. I've re-introduced native vegetation to attract insects that in turn attract birds and animals, and on up the food chain. I care for my land as naturally as possible without the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers—essential to the health of my little slice of nature.

But, beyond my property line, animals and birds are

still getting sick, injured or abused by humans. Do these innocent creatures have any recourse? Yes they do, right here in Petaluma at the Sonoma County Wildlife Rescue, scwildliferescue.org, on Meecham across from the entrance to the dump.

It doesn't sound like a tony address, but I visited recently and found SCWR perched atop a hill with bucolic westerly views, and smelling of clean barnyard. Started in 1981, SCWR is "dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of sick, injured and orphaned wildlife and the promotion of understanding and appreciation of wildlife." The Saturday tour is part of the Education Outreach Program.

This year they've received over 68 birds and animals including the expected hawks, owls, vultures, turkeys, raccoons, coyotes, opossums, skunks and rabbits, and surprisingly, a Mallard, a gull and a Great Blue Heron into one of two areas: rehabilitation and education. Animals that can be rehabilitated receive medical attention, physical therapy and are reintroduced to the wild. Those that are not able to recover fully or fend for themselves may become Education Ambassadors.

Public Relations volunteer Francesca Smith, a

five-year veteran of SCWR, began with a talk and then led a mixed group of thirty adults and kids through the habitats. Through her informative narrative, I learned that most animals come to the SCWR through injury, often hit by a car, or relinquished by folk who thought a raccoon, skunk, or wolf would make a good pet. I asked if animals show up with gunshot wounds and Francesca told stories of a duck with a dart in its head and the two mountain lion Education Ambassadors who had been rescued as kittens after a farmer killed their mother and tortured them. A Good Samaritan called in the abuse. Call-ins to the hotline (707.526.WILD) are welcomed.

The large habitats, placed in a stand of oak and eucalyptus, are shady and natural. Each enclosure has cover, perches and private sleeping areas. Many of the enclosures and their enclosure enrichments were built by volunteers such as the Airforce and Scouts earning merit badges. The Coast Guard grooms the trails and Army reserve volunteers built the "catwalk" for the mountain lions. Over in rehabilitation, our Petaluma community has pitched in, notably Palace of Fruit who donates produce and Aquascape Custom Crafted Pools who brought in a crew to build the otter pool.

The first animals I met on the tour were a non-native red fox and a little grey fox, possibly Foxy's twin. Next we sang with three-legged Wiley Coyote and his mate, Stacey. Francesca invited the half dozen four- to eight-year-olds to howl, and soon the coyotes joined in. Charming and playful, it's too bad coyotes are "nuisance wildlife" as are the big cats in ranching

areas. If you're bothered by wildlife in your walls, under the buildings, in the attic and eaves or hunting your domesticated animals, the Exclusion Service will evict and relocate the nuisance as well as seal the entries so they can't come back. A bobcat, the oldest and longest in residence, was captured in a peacock coop and now has a home at the center.

I was sorry to miss the raccoons, but their space is being re-decorated with a water feature and they weren't in residence. Francesca was quick to inform us that as cute as a raccoon is, it's a wild animal—and not a very nice one. She cautioned the group against approaching them. Better to call Sonoma County Wildlife Rescue. She also expounded on the breeding of wolves and dogs. SCWR is home to Sheila, who is part dog, and Willie, who lived with a family as a pup but was too wild for domesticated living as he grew up. She says it's sad for the animals. "A wolf needs much more range and challenge" to survive than domesticated dogs.

The Sonoma County Wildlife Rescue is a non-profit organization and relies on memberships, donations and volunteers to operate. Francesca suggested bookings for private tours and birthday parties. Party with nature! They have a wide variety of choices including a tour, games, activities and picnic tables.

At home, I've yelled at the shooting neighbors and the speeders on our lane, but I know I'm wasting my breath. Many folk don't respect the flora and fauna. I'm glad we live in the Shadow of Sonoma Mountain where wildlife is given a second chance.

BALLARD STREET by Jerry Van Amerongen



Writer Artie Stallings approaches his day.



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