

# Wildlife Watch

News From The Wildlife Center of Virginia

Summer 2006

## WILDLIFE CENTER ADMITS 45,000<sup>TH</sup> PATIENT – and 45,001 ... and 45,002 ... and 45,003 ... and 45,004 ...

On April 23, the Wildlife Center of Virginia admitted a Very Important Patient – Patient #45,000 of the Center's 24-year history.



That patient was a baby Virginia Opossum, about three months old, that was orphaned when its mother was struck and killed by a car in Augusta County.

Patient #45,000 was one of a litter of nine rescued by a concerned driver and brought to the Center.

All nine were unharmed and arrived in good condition. They received daily feeding and care until the end of May, when they were released.

"In one way, we were hoping that Patient #45,000 might be a Bald Eagle or a Black Bear or some endangered species," Center President Ed Clark said. "It makes sense that the honor goes to a common species – because common species have taught us the most about the problems affecting wildlife."

Like Patient #45,000, most of the animals checked into the Center's hospital are brought in by concerned individuals who find animals in need. Others are

brought in by animal-control officers, game wardens, law-enforcement officials, and wildlife rehabilitators.

And like Patient #45,000 and its eight siblings, a significant number of the Wildlife Center's patients each year are admitted because of automobile accidents. Trash lures wildlife to roads and roadsides, often at their peril. An important theme of the Wildlife Center's education programs is that "**Critters Don't Need Litter**" – which reminds people that the apple core tossed from a car, although biodegradable, may attract an opossum or other animal into harm's way. ❖

### Opossum Facts

- Latin name: *Didelphis virginiana*
- The opossum is the only North American marsupial – a mammal in which the female has a pouch. Other marsupials include koalas, wombats, and kangaroos.
- The female opossum carries and nurses her young [an average of eight or nine babies] in her pouch until they are two to three months old. Baby opossums then often hitch a ride on their mother's back for another month or two.
- The opossum has thumbs on its hind feet.

*For rescue advice for a baby opossum or other animal, check the Wildlife Center's website at [www.wildlifecenter.org](http://www.wildlifecenter.org), or call the Center at 540.942.9453.*

## Wildlife Center to Develop Bioterrorism Surveillance Network

The Wildlife Center of Virginia has been tapped to begin development of a bioterrorism surveillance network, designed to provide early warning of possible acts of bioterrorism across the country through detection and analysis of emerging diseases in wildlife.

The network, known as *Project Tripwire*, will provide rapid, effective communication of information to targeted defense and homeland security decision-makers – including the Department of Defense, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], and other federal and state agencies.

Most of the diseases identified as potential bioweapons are animal diseases which can be spread by wildlife, including avian influenza ["bird flu"], plague, anthrax, and cholera. The

intentional introduction of an infectious disease may show up in wildlife first – potentially well before the outbreak is identified in humans or domestic animals.

"The first victims of an infectious disease introduced into a city's municipal water supply are likely to be the ducks and geese that live at the reservoir," according to Wildlife Center President Ed Clark.

While there are systems in place for disease detection in humans and domestic animals, there currently is no comprehensive, coordinated effort to monitor wildlife for diseases – leaving a gaping hole in the nation's bioterrorism detection and defense systems.

*(continued on page 4)*

## A TRIBUTE TO SKYLER THE BALD EAGLE

### Wildlife Center Marks the Death of Conservation Advocate

For 21 years, one of the most important ambassadors of the Wildlife Center – in fact, one of our most popular and familiar public personalities – was someone who never was quoted in the newspaper, never returned a reporter’s telephone call, never shook hands with a Member of Congress.

That representative was Skyler, the Bald Eagle.

During his more than two decades at the Wildlife Center, Skyler appeared on nearly every major television network, in magazines and newspapers nationwide, at big events at the White House, Pentagon, and the U.S. Capitol, and not-so-big events at small rural elementary schools and civic club dinners.

Skyler passed away in April 2006. At age 25, he was an elderly eagle and was showing many signs of age, and his death – though sudden – was not unexpected.

Skyler’s public career began in 1984, when he was found in a Florida trailer park, his right wing badly burned after touching a live power line.

The eagle was cared for by the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey, but could not be returned to the wild due to his injuries. In 1985, he moved north to the Wildlife Center and quickly became a cornerstone of our award-winning environmental education and outreach programs.

Center President Ed Clark was Skyler’s trainer, handler, and sidekick. Together, they traveled tens of thousands of miles and made hundreds of appearances.

“Skyler was like the pass-key to the halls of power,” Clark observed. “There are very few elected officials who can resist the chance to have their photo taken with a Bald Eagle. While we were posing, I would deliver our environmental message. While holding Skyler, I definitely had their attention. In fact, most of the time, they were afraid to move!”

Flipping through Skyler’s scrapbook is like looking at a Who’s Who of political and public personalities. There are scores of Senators, Representatives, Governors, Cabinet officers, agency directors, media and entertainment personalities.



*Skyler and Ed Clark at a Capitol Hill news conference*

Clark and Skyler appeared twice on CNN’s *Larry King Live*, and on NBC’s *Today* show four times. Clark recalled *Today* host Katie Couric losing her entire train of thought when she noticed that Skyler’s tongue was blue and had barbs on it. Clark explained the function of the eagle’s tongue, then steered the conversation back to the Endangered Species Act – the topic he was there to discuss with the captivated Couric.

Even though Skyler was a part of the Wildlife Center for more than 20 years, his body cannot be buried at the Center with other deceased wildlife ambassadors. As required by law, eagles’ bodies are sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service repository in Colorado where their feathers and other body parts are distributed to Native Americans for use in religious and ceremonial rituals.

“I suppose that’s fitting,” reflected Clark. “Even after his death, my pal Skyler will continue to serve.” ❖



*In the Capitol Hill office of U.S. Representative Bob Goodlatte (R-VA)*

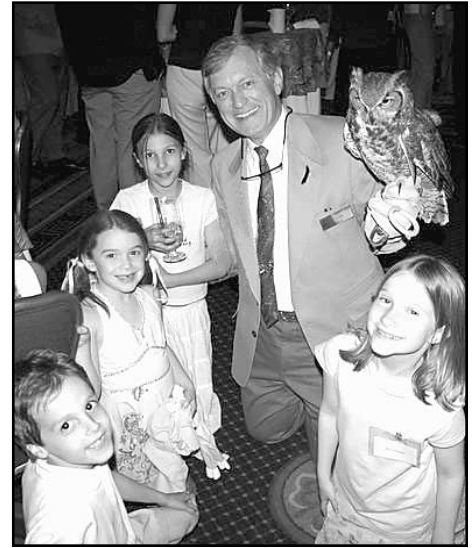
- In 1985, when Skyler came to the Wildlife Center, the total number of active Bald Eagle nests in Virginia numbered only about 75. Today, there are more than 400 active eagle nests in the Commonwealth.
- Electric transmission lines are now placed more than eight feet apart to prevent the kinds of accidents that crippled Skyler.

## All The Buzz ... About Buzz

Back in 1998, a Great-horned Owl near Weyers Cave took an unfortunate tumble out of his nest. The bird was taken to the Wildlife Center, but his injury – a badly fractured shoulder – meant that he could not be released to the wild. Instead, he began a career as a Wildlife Center education animal.

Buzz quickly became a frequent and popular visitor to classrooms all across Virginia. This year, Buzz has been even busier and has become something of an “A-List” celebrity.

- This spring, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries came out to the Wildlife Center with NASCAR driver Ward Burton to film a public-service announcement, promoting conservation and Virginia’s great outdoors. Buzz regally perched on Ward’s arm in the spots, which are now airing on TV stations all over Virginia.
- In May, Buzz [and Center President Ed Clark] attended the Washington premier of *Hoot*, the new movie about kids in Florida fighting to save burrowing owls. *Hoot* was produced and features music by Wildlife Center favorite Jimmy Buffett. [The local chapter of the Parrotheads, the Buffett fan club, has designated the Center as the main beneficiary of their charitable activities.] Buzz was the talk of the *Hoot* red carpet – and he handled the paparazzi without ruffling a feather. ❖



*Buzz, Ed Clark, and friends at the Hoot premier.*

## At The Center ...

May is usually one of the very busiest times at the Wildlife Center, and this spring was no exception. A total of 554 new patients were admitted in May – an average of nearly 18 patients per day. Included in that total were 78 rabbits and 62 opossums ... 44 American Robins ... six Bald Eagles ... and four Black Bears.

Among the Center’s patients this spring:



- A Bald Eagle was admitted on May 3 from Accomac County, on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. The adult bird was thin and unable to fly – although the cause was unclear. After a thorough check by Center vets, some “R-and-R”, and physical therapy in a 60-foot flight pen, the eagle was ready for release. On May 27, Dr. Paula Cameron of the Eastern Shore Animal Hospital made the long drive to and from Waynesboro to return the eagle to the Eastern Shore for release.
- A Canada Goose was admitted in March from Roanoke with an arrow through its right shoulder. While x-rays revealed no broken bones, Center vets operated on the bird five times to remove the arrow and fully clean the wound. The goose was returned to Roanoke and released on June 6.
- Not all of the Center’s patients travel great distances or check in for long stays. Some even fly in themselves. One May morning, an Ovenbird smacked into one of the Center’s front windows. The stunned bird was quickly brought into the clinic, where Center vets gave it a check and some oxygen. The Ovenbird was out the door and back on its way within an hour. ❖

Please help us continue the vital work of the Wildlife Center of Virginia with a special contribution.

Thank You!

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at the historic Stonewall Jackson Hotel  
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Cocktails • Dinner • Live & Silent Auctions

For information contact the Center at  
540.942.9453 or [apatterson@wildlifecenter.org](mailto:apatterson@wildlifecenter.org).

## Project Tripwire

*(continued from page 1)*

“While all eyes seem to be on the front door, with surveillance of human and domestic animal disease emergencies, the Wildlife Center’s project will protect the back door, through which the more sinister threats are likely to come,” Clark said.

The contract with the Institute for Defense and Homeland Security will allow the Wildlife Center to plan the creation of a nationwide data-sharing network of 20 to 25 of North America’s largest wildlife hospitals. By linking these wildlife care centers through the Internet and automated reporting systems, the appearance of any new or unusual wildlife events can be quickly detected and reported.

The planning phase of the project is to be completed this fall. ❖

*Top photo: Colonel W. Gerald Massengill, Interim Director of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and Center President Ed Clark prepare to release a Bald Eagle treated at the Wildlife Center [February 2006].*

## Our “Faculty”

The Wildlife Center currently has a “faculty” of about 20 animals – animals whose injuries or behavioral modifications preclude their release to the wild. These animals, including hawks, owls, opossums, and snakes, are traveling ambassadors for the Center, appearing with our education staff at school assemblies, in classrooms, and at local civic group events throughout Virginia.

These education animals make the Center’s programs unforgettable. There is no better way to teach kids – or adults – about wildlife and important environmental issues than to let them see up-close those animals who are being affected by our daily decisions and behaviors.

Among the Center’s new education animals are Altair, a Red-tailed Hawk [left], and Edie, an American Kestrel [right].

For additional information about our education programs, contact the Center at 540.942.9453 or [edu@wildlifecenter.org](mailto:edu@wildlifecenter.org). ❖

