

THE LAUREL OF  
**ASHEVILLE**  
THE ARTS AND CULTURE OF COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS

APRIL 2019

**SUSTAINABILITY**

## THE WILD TRUTH

### Wildlife in Education

BY JEN KNIGHT

As much as Balsam Mountain Trust staff love working with and caring for the resident education opossum, Blossom, they sometimes wish they'd never met. Blossom lives at the Trust because injuries she sustained as a baby, likely the result of a car impact, made her ill-suited to life in the wild. She will never have a mate, never raise her own joeys and never know the freedom of exploring and foraging in her own territory.

She does, however, have a role to play. Blossom is an animal ambassador, fostering new and lasting connections between the public and the natural world. "Animal ambassadors play an important role in environmental education," says Rose Wall, education director and senior naturalist with the Trust. "Seeing a wild animal up close and personal seems to move people in a different way than simply learning about the animal or even coming across it in nature."

Animal ambassadors, or education animals, have been a key component of environmental and conservation education programs for decades. Seasoned presenters and animal keepers field many questions from the public about an animal's care, provenance and reasons for captivity. "It is our sincere hope as educators that they will develop empathy for wildlife and will tap into that again and again when thinking about the plight of animals in the wild," says Wall. "We hope that this empathy will inspire action towards conservation."

It's working. "I had a man come up and tell me, for example, that he will no longer kill a snake in his yard after getting to meet and touch Onyx, our black rat snake," says Wall. "Meeting our opossum injured by a car when feeding on roadside litter inspired a teacher to implement

a campus litter cleanup project." Even a bullfrog had a lesson to teach. One school ceased using herbicides after learning how harmful chemical runoff into streams is to amphibians.

So where do these animals come from? Some come from zoos and nature centers, but many of our captive native species come from wildlife rehabilitators who have determined that the animals are non-releasable, or unable to survive in the wild.



Barred Owl at May Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.  
Photo by Winslow Umberger

The term "non-releasable" refers to several factors that impact an animal's ability to survive. Most, like Blossom, have injuries that prevent them from finding food or navigating their world. Some have lost critical habitat that cannot be easily replaced. Still others have been imprinted on humans—becoming desensitized or dependent—to such a degree that they may be a danger to themselves or people if released. In addition, animals that have been raised by well-meaning members of the public often have serious health complications from unmet dietary and health requirements.

Caring for these animals is a pleasure and a challenge for those with the proper training. Wild animals in captivity require experts seriously committed

to ensuring the animals will thrive rather than just survive. This includes providing mentally stimulating activities, consistent care and adaptations to accommodate injuries.

Animal ambassadors can inspire a future career path in a grade-schooler, community revitalization projects or new conservation legislation. Just like providing necessary care, playing the role of intermediary by helping give Blossom and others like her a voice in their own conservation is a great honor for educational organizations.

*Jen Knight serves on the development committee of Appalachian Wildlife Refuge (AppalachianWild.org) and is the co-education director and senior naturalist at Balsam Mountain Trust (BalsamMountainTrust.org).*

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Appalachian Wild  
co-founder Savannah  
Tranham with  
groundhog. Photo by  
Winslow Umberger



Carlton Burke with  
Northern pine snake.  
Photo by Vicky Burke



Jen Knight of Balsam  
Mountain Trust with  
Blossom, a Virginia  
opossum. Photo by  
Winslow Umberger



Peregrine Falcon  
at May Wildlife  
Rehabilitation  
Center. Photo by  
Winslow Umberger



Carlton Burke and  
Eastern box turtles.  
Photo by Vicky Burke