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Stuart the possum couldn't be released into the wild, so Karen Brace uses him to educate others. He's even on Facebook.

Rescuer has an abiding passion for possums

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The first time Karen Brace opened a box filled with orphaned opossums and found 11 babies looking back at her, with jet black eyes and tiny pink noses that sniffed at her curiously, she thought of aliens from the “Men in Black” movies.

Then, she fell in love.

Brace took the babies from her Stafford County home to a wildlife rehabilitator in Culpeper County and begged for an education.

“I said, you need to teach me how to take care of these things because they are adorable,” Brace said.

That was spring 2017, and Brace, who's been a registered wildlife rehabber since 2012, added possums, as they're informally called, to the list of small mammals she tends. While squirrels will always be her first love—and her home in the woods

is decorated with flags, statues and signs of the nut seekers—Brace clearly has a passion for possums.

“I think they are the most misunderstood animal in all of Virginia,” said Brace, a self-employed contractor who does background investigations for the State Department. “Most people think possums are vicious, aggressive animals that are disease ridden, but they're actually very docile. They will try to get away from you if they can.”

And if they can't—if they're cornered in a garage, raiding a poultry nest or rooting through trash—then sure, they're going to get defensive.

“The possum is going to show its teeth and hiss and growl and spit, puff up like a cat and generally act like it's crazy and diseased,” Brace admitted.

It's all an act, she said, just like their ability to play dead. During the course of



Brace has about 40 young possums in her care. They'll be released into the wild when they're about 4 months old.

her career as a “possum nanny,” which she claims isn't nearly as glamorous as it sounds, Brace has discovered their last-resort measure.

“They squirt a green substance out of their butt that smells like death,” she said.

And she wonders why the list of people willing to rehab possums is so short.

Even Carolyn Wilder, president of the Wildlife Rescue Club in Northern Virginia of which Brace is a member, acknowledges possums aren't going to win many popularity contests.

First off, people fear they have rabies. But their body temperature is so low, the chance of them carrying the virus is extremely rare, according to the Opossum Society of the United States.

The second misconception is harder to dispel.

“They look like a big frickin' rat with

POSSUMS

► FROM A1

that tail. They're not the kind of animal you think you would be cuddling up to," Wilder said. "And then there's Karen."

THE POSSUM NANNY

Possoms are North America's only native marsupial, and Brace has something in her pouch to prove they're not so bad after all.

His name is Stuart.

As she tells the story, two possums were found in Stafford and brought to her last August, and she named the smaller one after Stuart Little. He weighed 27 grams, less than an ounce.

She rehabbed both of them just like she treats the 40 baby possums that sleep in hammocks, in cages in her basement and just outside, under the porch. She feeds the smallest every few hours, not with bottles, but through a tube that's put down their throats to mimic their mother's long nipples.

Some people are turned off or scared of that prospect, and she believes that's why they may not rehab baby possums.

As the possums mature, she serves a smoothie-like food mixed in a blender, twice daily at 8. It consists of softened dog kibble, mixed vegetables, strawberry yogurt, quail eggs, herbs and any leftovers lying around.

Her guests will eat anything.

"If you ever want to feel like a rock star in the kitchen," Brace said, "cook for possums."

Stuart and his brother, Mickey, progressed under her care and neared the age they could be released into the wild, about 4 months old. That's when X-rays showed both had a severe bone disease. Mickey's was so bad he had to be euthanized.

Because it's illegal to keep a wild animal as a pet, state law dictates that any animal that can't be released be put down or used as an educational animal.

Brace went that route with Stuart, filing piles of paperwork to get approval and permits from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

PASSION 'IS CONTAGIOUS'

Stuart sleeps in an outside enclosure that cost \$1,200. It's an elaborate one, with tree trunks and a ramp that leads to his bed. Gerbera daisies are planted around it. Brace also is a master gardener.

This year, in addition to her full-time work, rehabbing and side venture making herbal cosmetics and salves, she started a business called "Awesome 'Possumz." Brace takes Stuart around to schools,



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Karen Brace gives antibiotics to a young possum with a skin condition.

WHEN HUMAN HELP IS NEEDED

Adult birds, foxes, squirrels, rabbits and raccoons often leave their young alone in nests or dens while they forage, but the mothers do return, said Carolyn Wilder, president of the Wildlife Rescue League, which serves Northern Virginia south to Fredericksburg and west to Fauquier County.

To those who call the league, alarmed because they've found a baby animal alone, Wilder said often the best advice is to put it back. Leave it alone. The parent will return.

That's not the case with opossums. If one is found alone, it's probably fallen off its mother's back—and the

mom, carrying a litter of 10 to 12, may not have noticed.

Possoms are no bigger than bees at birth and, like other marsupials, have to claw their way from the birth canal to their mother's pouches, where they stay for several months. They attach themselves to long, tube-like nipples to feed.

Babies stay in the pouch for about two months, then do a possum-piggyback, clinging to any spot on the mom they can find.

Rehabbers like Karen Brace often will get an entire litter at once, usually after the mother has been hit by a car. Sometimes, those who

rescue the orphans know how to disconnect the babies from the extended nipple. Others will "take the whole kit and caboodle, dead mom with all the babies in it" to the rehabber, Wilder said.

The Wildlife Rescue League maintains a hotline, staffed by volunteers, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days a week: 703/440-0800.

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries also maintains a list of licensed wildlife rehabilitators online at dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/injured/rehabilitators/. It also has a conflict helpline, staffed weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at 855/571-9003.



Brace believes possums are 'the most misunderstood animal in all of Virginia.' She finds them adorable, even as she cleans out cages and food bowls.

day care centers, senior facilities or anywhere else people want to see a possum up close.

She charges \$150 for an hourlong presentation and uses the money for food and veterinary expenses, for Stuart and his many cousins that come through the home she shares with her understanding husband, Greg.

She and Stuart recently entertained about 35 seniors at the Pozez Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia, who loved the visit, said Michele Endick, lead adult group coordinator.

Stuart was adorable, she said, and "it was obvious that Ms. Brace is very dedicated."

Ted Schubel had a similar reaction when Brace brought Stuart to his office. He does Town Talk each weekday morning on NewsTalk 1230 AM and was "quite nervous about having a real possum in the studio."

He expected a hissing, angry animal, not one that fellow staff members would fawn over as it sat in Brace's lap or clung to her shoulder. He agreed that Stuart didn't look anything like the creatures he'd seen in the road.

"I do now look at possums and squirrels much differently," he said. "Karen's passion for animals is contagious."

Amanda Smith, who directs the station's promotions and marketing, agreed. She met Brace a year ago when she found an injured baby squirrel, and the rehabber has become her "go-to for little critters that need help."

"Stuart is a great ambassador for opossums," Smith said.

'VALUE ON LIFE'

Brace likes to point out how possums help the environment, mainly because they eat just about anything they encounter. They consume 4,000 to

5,000 ticks per season, so they may slow the spread of tick-borne diseases. They're immune to snake venom and may keep the copperhead population in check, along with mice, rats and cockroaches. They also eat dead animals, rotten fruit and vegetables and garden pests such as slugs and voles.

"They add beauty to the landscape," she quipped.

Brace hasn't won over every skeptic. Sometimes, when she says she rehabs possums, squirrels and groundhogs—and even helped a mouse get back on its feet—people look at her in disbelief. They understand rescuing injured eagles or deer, but rodents?

"Who am I to put a value on life?" she asked, then smirked. "I firmly believe that the mouse I raise and release in this life will be the supervisor in my next life."

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