

By JONATHAN PITTS

A nurse to wild animals

Injured animals are nursed back to health at Kathy Woods' ranch house in Baltimore County, Maryland.

IT'S the "insanely busy season" at the largest wildlife rehabilitation centre in the Baltimore area. Which means that more than the usual complement of injured and orphaned animals has taken up residence in the basement of Kathy Woods' modest ranch house in the Phoenix woods.

Baby sparrows are chirping. Raccoons, possums and groundhogs waddle in cages. Two tiny barn owls scream their lungs out when hungry.

Turtles with eye infections, ducks with limps and bunnies in need of weaning are among the more than 150 critters currently receiving species-specific treatment – and awaiting their hoped-for return to the wild – at the Phoenix Wildlife Centre in Baltimore County, Maryland, United States.

What others might call pandemonium, Woods – one of the most sought-after wildlife rehabilitators in Maryland – describes as "wonderful chaos."

"It's madness, and no, it never really stops," she said one recent afternoon in her cheerfully cluttered home, the site of the non-profit. "I wouldn't trade it for anything."

It has been nearly 25 years since Woods and her husband, birding expert and now-retired hospital administrator Hugh Simmons, bought a 1ha spread on a hillside on Manor Road with an eye towards helping the state's native animals.

When they started out in 1992, Woods worked mostly alone, treating 40 animals or so per year. Now, about 20 volunteers, including Simmons, help her take care of more than 1,500 creatures annually.

This time of year, the centre's dozens of indoor cages and outdoor aviaries are mostly at capacity – one reason she'll be moving operations to a 90ha expanse not far away sometime next year.

"Yes, I have to say we've grown," says Woods, who still works without drawing a salary.

The story of the Phoenix Wildlife Centre began decades ago, and took root and spread as surely as the oaks and sugar maples that surround its headquarters. But getting that story intact from Woods can be a challenge.

The distractions rarely stop. The phone rings every few minutes. She gets up every half-hour to feed baby birds. And she must gently fend off the four cats and one dog that share her home, not to mention speaking above the constant chatter of Bird, an African gray parrot who repeats her words from another room.

"Thank you; thank you," he squawks, his voice a carbon copy of hers.

"I must say 'thank you' a lot," Woods says, and laughs.

Bit by bit, the tale emerges.

Her father was a civil engineer who moved his family frequently. Woods, born in 1950, grew up in places as far-flung as Iceland, Mexico and Pakistan, always dreaming of becoming a veterinarian.

Both parents loved animals – her dad took her to zoos wherever they lived – but neither saw veterinary science as suitable work for a girl. She ended up running doctors' offices for more than 20 years, eventually coordinating surgical procedures at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Woods reconnected with her passion in the early 1990s, when she became a volunteer for the federal whooping crane reintroduction programme at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Centre in Laurel. She loved helping replenish the numbers of rare birds and restoring them to the wild. Within two years, she was a full-fledged wildlife rehabilitator,



A pigeon with a broken wing is nursed back to health at the Phoenix Wildlife Centre. — Photos: TNS



Holly Zahrobky (left) delivering two small injured birds to the Phoenix Wildlife Centre based in the ranch of Simmons (centre) and his wife Woods.



Woods holding a baby Carolina wren that was caught in a lounge chair and suffered a broken leg.

one of only about 50 in the state.

She has immersed herself in the field ever since, accepting and nursing sick and stray animals, poring over the latest research on native species, trawling for donated supplies and staying in close contact with dozens of veterinarians around the state.

After earning permits from the state and federal governments – required to legally treat wild animals – Woods moved with Simmons to their current home and used her own money to start the Phoenix Wildlife Centre.

Her unaffected manner, considerable knowledge and gift for explanation have made Woods one of the state's most popular instructors on wildlife – she's known for showing up at festivals with birds of prey on her shoulder. She is president of the Maryland Wildlife Rehabilitators Association.

Woods' reputation as a clinician has grown to the point where veterinarians, animal-control officers, and animal-loving residents throughout the county, across the state and sometimes beyond think of her first when they run across a wounded bird, an abandoned fawn, a hawk

with an injured wing or a squirrel stuck in a glue trap.

She rarely goes out to pick up patients. She tries instead to talk callers through their problems, arranging for transport to Phoenix only when she deems it necessary.

When the animals arrive, it becomes clear why Woods is a go-to resource.

Whatever the problem might be, clients say, she can generally diagnose it and devise a plan of treatment on the spot.

Michael Epps, an animal control officer for Baltimore County, has been taking wild animals to Woods for years.

"She is truly an amazing person," Epps says. "I've brought her everything – unwanted kittens, baby and adult raccoons, even a turkey buzzard with an injured wing that couldn't fly."

"Kathy always seems to know right away what needs to be done. I remember how she rehabbed that old buzzard. Now he's off enjoying his life."

Scrubbing geese enclosures, helping rescue baby hummingbirds, dispensing feed to a menagerie that includes barn owls, bats, hawks, a

groundhog and a peregrine falcon, and simply hearing Woods discuss the various species and their courses of treatment has added up to a unique education.

Woods often tells others her three basic directives for handling injured wildlife are "warm, dry and dark" – those who find an injured creature should refrain from giving animals water, for instance, as many will swallow it down the wrong pipe – and should also enclose them comfortably. Duffy says he has seen the value of those directives almost daily.

Then there are the particulars. Baby bunnies or fawns that seem to be alone rarely are (their mothers forage for food during the day). Baby owls hiss. Baby hummingbirds have such high metabolism that they must eat every few minutes.

Owls are vicious predators with powerful grips. Approach the cutest baby groundhog in the world, and he's liable to bare his long teeth.

Woods, who never names her patients, warns anyone who will listen not to anthropomorphise them.

"Kathy says there's a reason they're called wild animals," says volunteer James Duffy.

A Middle River woman recently called after a boater hit a post that supported an osprey nest. (Woods went out herself, picking up several swimming chicks by hand, climbing a ladder and placing them in a makeshift nest she had built.)

She got a call from a woman in western Canada who told her that some friends then boating up the Atlantic coast had found a nest of baby birds on board. Woods set up a meeting at a centre in New Jersey.

"We couldn't do what we do without a network," she says.

Closer to home, the "chaos" continues year round.

Each incident is different. Woods says, requiring its own diagnosis, and she's always happy to answer callers' questions about an animal in need or order a pickup if need be. The centre will keep that patient as long as treatment is called for.

Sometime next year she'll move to a new site in Gunpowder Falls State Park which includes a house. Woods hopes to use the new space to set up seminar rooms, accommodate more outdoor cages, add youth volunteer programmes and more. – The Baltimore Sun/Tribune News Service