

Not For the Squeamish by Cindy Williams

I'm going to warn you right up front that there will be a picture or two associated with this article that might seem a little gross to you regarding a medical case. If you're up for it read on. If not you might want to skip this section this month.

But let's start with three cautionary tales with only "safe" photos involving a bunny and two squirrels. The rabbit had been found by some folks as a baby who decided to make a pet out of it. No matter how well-intentioned, this is not a good idea. Although I've heard many tales of people who have successfully kept wild animals as pets (well, at least it was successful for the persons) the vast majority of these tales turn out badly. Wild animals require specialized diets, they tend to "turn wild" in their teenage years no matter how loved and pampered they are (often once it is too late to teach them how to survive in the wild), they usually can't be toilet trained, and they just flat out don't belong in homes with people. Let the wild be free. Anyway, this little rabbit became a pet who "got along very well with the cat". Until it didn't. The rabbit was attacked by the cat and of course came out the worse for it. Poor rabbits are at the bottom of the food chain and are easy prey for most four-legged critters.

Cat bites almost always lead to infection so we have to put all cat bite victims on antibiotics (which mean daily shots) for two weeks. In addition to the daily shots she also had to endure daily wound care for a degloving injury on her back. The wound was initially cleaned with dilute Betadyne then covered with a soaked pad which is covered with a waterproof bandage and wrapped with vet wrap. After a few days we were able to convert her over to swabbing with SS cream and no bandage (which is the look she is sporting in this photo). If she doesn't perish from stress, she will hopefully be releasable after weeks of daily care.



A squirrel is another wild animal that makes a bad pet. This month we received a squirrel who had also been found as an orphan (or so they thought – reuniting with the mother should always be the first choice unless the mother is known to be dead or the baby is injured). Baby squirrels are off-the-charts cute so it's easy to see why they would fall in love with it. Unfortunately once a squirrel becomes a teenager they are likely to bite. As someone who has raised more than her fair share of squirrel babies, I can tell you that the likelihood of this is very, very, very high – in fact I can almost guarantee it. This is a great sign of success for rehabbers whose only goal for them is life in the wild but as you can imagine it did not go over well with the folks who wanted a cute, sweet companion. So they brought him to us.

Here's the problem. The squirrel is now dependent upon people for food, he has potentially not been prepared for life in the wild by feeding him natural foods, and he has not been released in time to figure out about finding food and stashing it for the winter. Add to that the fact that he has no fear of humans and has been accustomed to climb on them. Now picture yourself walking down your neighborhood when suddenly you are approached by a hungry adult squirrel who climbs up your leg looking for a handout. I wouldn't blame you for being scared to death, I know I would be (I'm telling you, those little cuties can BITE, no fooling around). This does not bode well for the squirrel or the hapless passerby. So now we have to teach him how to be wild without approaching humans (in other words be

afraid of them) and we'll have to put him in a situation where he can survive the harsh winter weather. All because some people thought it would be fun to have a wild animal as a pet.

Speaking of pets, remember that bunny who got attacked by the cat in her home (I bet you do remember, after all it was only a few paragraphs ago!)? Well my last cautionary tale is about those pet cats who roam the great outdoors. Do any Google search on cats *killing wildlife* or similar and you'll see plenty of sources stating that cats are responsible for the death of literally billions of wild animals every year. According to Wild Birds Unlimited "Pet cats that are allowed to roam free account for some 4 MILLION bird deaths EACH DAY in North America, or over 1 BILLION songbirds each year. This figure does not include the losses resulting from feral or wild populations of cats." The emphasis is theirs, not mine. So this month someone's pet cat caught a squirrel and gave her a spinal injury. This squirrel's back legs are paralyzed (her front legs are starting to work, which is a good sign). She must be fed a slurry by syringe because she can't eat on her own and her bladder must be expressed in order for her to urinate (that's a fancy way of saying we have to push the pee out of her – I know, ewww). It's a coin flip as to whether or not this little gal will make a recovery that will allow her to be released back out into the wild and in the meantime she will require a lot of daily care. We are grateful that she was brought to us for help



and hope that our intervention will be enough.

And finally I bring you a story of survival in which a poor Great Horned Owl was unlucky enough to swoop into a barbed wire fence and get hung up. I first saw this beauty (I'm going to say she's female because of her size – female raptors tend to be larger than males) shortly after surgery to repair her right eye, which had caught the brunt of the barbed wire and was in pretty bad shape. The first picture is from her surgery. She was not eating and was not able to close her eye – this means we had to feed her by hand ("tweezer feed") several times a day as well as putting ointment in her eye to keep it moist. To say that she was not happy about this treatment would be a great understatement. The good news is that someone witnessed the accident so she was able to get help right away (thank you once again Lee's Summit Animal Control) – often when we get injured animals we have to deal not only with the injury but the starvation, dehydration and parasites that indicate they've been down for a while before they are found. The bad news is this means she is very strong and very active and not at all disinclined to letting us know about her dissatisfaction with her treatment. I don't think we'll be giving her a comment card to fill out upon her release.



Let me elaborate a bit about the nature of her injury. Owls have three eyelids. Two of them are the kind that are familiar to us – the upper and the lower. The third is a layer called the *nictitating membrane*. This third eyelid is used to clean and protect the eye and closes

diagonally from inside to outside. This gal, unfortunately, lost her right upper eyelid in the accident. So on the day I first saw her (and for several days) it appeared that she was not going to be able to protect and lubricate the eye herself and that she might lose it (not to mention she was being a wild woman in the cage which added to the possibility of injury). There was some trauma to the eye itself as well. So after a few days of this she went back to



the veterinarian for reexamination to see if the eye could still be saved (have I mentioned how much we love the folks at Kansas City Veterinary Clinic in Waldo? Well, we do!). Her sutures were removed and apparently that helped because shortly afterwards she was able to close her third eyelid and the eye was still in good enough shape to save. The second photo gives a good idea of what that third eyelid looks like. And it also gives you a good idea of what a ticked off owl looks like. Don't you love it?!

We love our wild animals and we love caring for them, but there's nothing we'd like better than to see them stay wild and free and healthy without the need for a stay in our facilities. Please do your part by controlling your pets to prevent injury to either your pet or the wild animals. And by all means, lend a helping hand when you see them in trouble. It is legal and right for

you to do so and to keep them long enough to transport them to us (but not across state lines). It is illegal for you to keep them and care for them yourselves, or to keep them as pets. Let's give them a chance to live out their natural lives as nature intended.