

Sharp Teeth and Sharp Shins... by Cindy Williams

Even if “overwintering” is not a term with which you are familiar I bet you can guess what it means. Sometimes we get injured animals too late in the season to be able to rehabilitate them and send them back out to the wild in time for them to find a suitable place to hibernate for the winter. This is especially true with amphibians and reptiles.

There are several different words that are, while not synonymous, at least closely linked to the general term “hibernation”; torpor and brumation are the more common terms when discussing the hibernation habits of amphibians and reptiles, respectively. They all mean roughly the same thing, but the physical differences between mammals and amphibians/reptiles often prompt the distinction. To put it in a nutshell, amphibians and reptiles are *ectothermic*, which means they derive their body heat externally rather than generating their own like we mammals do. That can wreak some havoc in the winter! So frogs, toads, turtles, all find a place where they are protected from the elements (and predators) and slow their bodies down for a long winter sleep. Terrestrial (land based) animals will burrow under the ground and attempt to get below the frost line for their nap, while aquatic (water based) animals will often settle down in the mud at the bottom of a pond. Torpor and brumation can also be thought of as a milder form of hibernation – torpor can be considered a shorter “sleep” and brumation might be considered a lighter “sleep”.

Animals are cued to hibernate by the changing weather conditions. Once it starts turning colder and the days get shorter, they start eating their final meals and searching for the perfect napping spot. For animals in warmer climates it may not be necessary to hibernate at all. Similarly, our overwintered animals do not have a need to hibernate since they are in the warm indoors like us. Room 4 in the rehab hospital is where most of our overwintering guests stay. Here are a few of their stories.

Box Turtles are the most common winter patients – they can be either the 3-Toed or Ornate variety, both are common to our area and you’ve likely seen them trying to cross the road during certain times of the year. One 3-Toed Box Turtle who found his way to Lakeside in early October sporting a badly mangled right rear leg and a crack in his lower shell (aka *plastron*) didn’t quite make the crossing in time and got hit by a car. Normal wound care did not work for his poor leg and it was determined that it needed to be amputated. Thankfully we have the assistance of some very skilled veterinarians at Kansas City Veterinary Care who were able to successfully remove the injured limb and he’ll get skilled care from our rehabbers at Lakeside He should do just fine in the wild with three legs (they are not, after all, known for their speed and hunting prowess). But that kind of healing takes time and it’s way too late in the year for him to brave the elements even if he were ready to be released. Room 4 will remain his home until we get a stretch of good weather, probably in April.



Once you know what to look for it's fairly easy to tell a 3-Toed from an Ornate. Their top shell (or *carapace*) tells the tale. If you notice our friend in the picture you'll see that his carapace is a fairly plain, olive color (the purple wrap is a bandage called Vet Wrap that is being used to protect the wound care going on for his plastron). An Ornate will have yellow lines adorning the carapace. Both have a domed shell and they are the only two terrestrial turtles in our area – other common Midwestern turtles such as the Snapping Turtle and the Red-Eared Slider are considered aquatic or semiaquatic turtles.

This little Line (or Lined) Snake was found in the basement of Oak Grove's City Hall and they were smart enough to know that eviction in November would be a death sentence for him. All he needs from us is a warm, moist environment and some insects to sustain him (his preferred meal is a nice juicy earthworm). There are four subspecies of Line Snakes and they are found throughout the central United States. Snakes don't make up a large population of our overwintered animals but it's not unusual to have a few of them hanging out in Room 4.



Even more unusual is the Collared Lizard who got caught in a pallet of rocks and fractured her back leg. The folks who found her kept her for a week and a half before they brought her in and they said she never ate during that time. She was put on antibiotics and it was touch and go for a while – at one point she was down to only 5 grams in weight and she came in at about 9 grams. But she's rebounded nicely and is now up to a whopping 11 grams and climbing. This little cutie may end up as one of our display animals. She's very active in her aquarium and seems to love her steady diet of crickets and mealworms. You might look for her the next time you're at the Center, she's absolutely adorable!



Speaking of adorable, this little Grebe was passing through our area by way of Lake Jacomo when she showed up on someone's yard for several days, seemingly unable to fly away. Perhaps she was caught in a small arm of the lake that froze over and she was unable to catch fish or insects, their common meals. She was very malnourished on arrival and she ate up a storm right away – crickets and minnows. Grebes are freshwater diving birds, smaller than a duck, and they catch live fish by plunging under the water and chasing them down. It's really quite a sight to see. She seems to be injury free and we've gotten reports that there is still a flock of them at the lake so as soon as we can fatten this one up a little bit we're going to send her right back out to join her buddies – hopefully her stay will be very short. Animals who migrate to warmer climates instead of hibernating pose a special challenge to rehabbers. If we miss the window of opportunity to get them back with their flock they must either be overwintered or transported to their winter grounds (or at least far enough to catch up with their flock). This sometimes requires communication with birders in other parts of the states. Thankfully we won't have to go to such extreme measures with this one and she will be on her way shortly.

