

A Change in the Weather By Cindy Williams

There's a definite chill in the air, and Halloween required extra layers and heavy coats. Humans and critters alike are getting ready for the harsher months of the year in the Midwest. We're bringing in the wood for the fireplace, disconnecting the hoses, putting away the lawn mowers, pulling out the winter clothes. And our wildlife friends are doing their version of the same. Gathering and burying food, lining dens, fleeing south, putting on layers of fat, or just finding a place for a long winter's nap.



At Lakeside, winter is the slow season. Babies are no longer coming in so most of what we see are adults who have gotten into trouble. Some of them, like the raptors we see come and go, will be fine being released back into the harsh winter environment (back into their home environments). But at this time of year we have to start thinking about overwintering anything that hibernates or migrates or just hasn't had time to grow fast enough to learn about getting a meal when there were still plenty of meals to be had.

This year that last category includes some late season Eastern Gray Squirrel babies. Many of them have been soft released into yards where they will continue to be fed through the winter and allowed to live in their original nest boxes if they so choose. But a few of them came to us in this fall with their eyes still closed – this is really late for babies to be born and they will not even be able to go outside this year, requiring a lot of care over the winter from some dedicated home rehabbers. We are also still working with a couple of “pets” – squirrels that were “saved” by humans and kept instead of turning them over to qualified rehabbers. While I'm sure these people meant no harm, they did cause harm. We have to make these squirrels wild before they can be released (assuming that's possible) and this late in the year they might not be able to become releasable and prepare for the winter as a wild squirrel should, so again that's an animal that must be overwintered. The same is often true with Raccoons – if we get late season babies we may have to help them through their first winter, and if we get the occasional “pet” it can be impossible to make them whole before the bad weather arrives. Let me make it clear, these animals do NOT do well in captivity that long, and it is very illegal to keep wildlife if you are not a rehabber except to transport it to a qualified entity (in our area, Lakeside Nature Center – we are very lucky to have a place to take injured and abandoned wildlife).

Other common overwinterers (ok, that's not really a word but I think you know what I mean) are turtles and snakes. 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, and 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”.

So if these unlucky animals find themselves on our doorstep this late in the year, we have to seriously consider keeping them until the spring. Damaged shells take a long time to heal, so turtles are our most common winter guests. But anyone who can't find a proper winter home is a candidate.

One unusual bird that came to us last month was lucky enough to be able to be released and continue his journey southward without too much trouble. This Grasshopper Sparrow was found struggling at the Ford Plant in Claycomo. A thorough exam uncovered no wounds and he was able to fly as soon as he came in, but very few adult wild animals are able to be caught by mere humans if they are completely healthy so it was assumed he bonked his head pretty hard (either on a car or a window – or maybe a car window considering the location!) and just needed to clear his muddled head. He stuck around for 5 days while we made sure he was ok, and believe me he was. He led Ruth and me on a merry little chase trying to corral him for release (Ruth caught him, of course – she's such a pro!). He was definitely ready to go. I was able to return him to the plant and let him continue his quest for a place to spend the winter. For a Grasshopper Sparrow in our area, that probably means southern Texas.



As a reminder, the most ubiquitous sparrows we see at our birdfeeders are House Sparrows – they are an introduced species that we are not able to rehab at the Center because they are non-native. But many other sparrows inhabit our region, or at least pass through. According to Birds of North America, there are 35 different sparrow species found in most regions of North America. The Grasshopper Sparrow is considered more of an eastern sparrow but its summer range goes as far as western Kansas. This is the first one I've seen – I'm told there was some yellow on his wing that clued the staff into the proper identification. Just goes to show you that even amongst something as common as sparrows there are unusual things to be discovered which makes life as a rehabber (or a wildlife lover) so interesting.



Even though we're heading into the winter season we're always looking ahead to the next baby season. Lakeside could use more home wildlife rehabbers for next year. What will you need to bring to the table? Adequate land space to house and/or "soft" release self-sufficient babies, a flexible schedule that allows several feedings per day, availability for most of the spring and summer, and a Missouri residency. Previous animal handling experience is ideal but we will provide all the training and much of the supplies needed. Sound intriguing? I can attest to the fact that it is tough, but oh so worth it. Contact the Center at (816) 513-8960 if you think you might be interested. Winter is fleeting and spring will be here before you know it!