

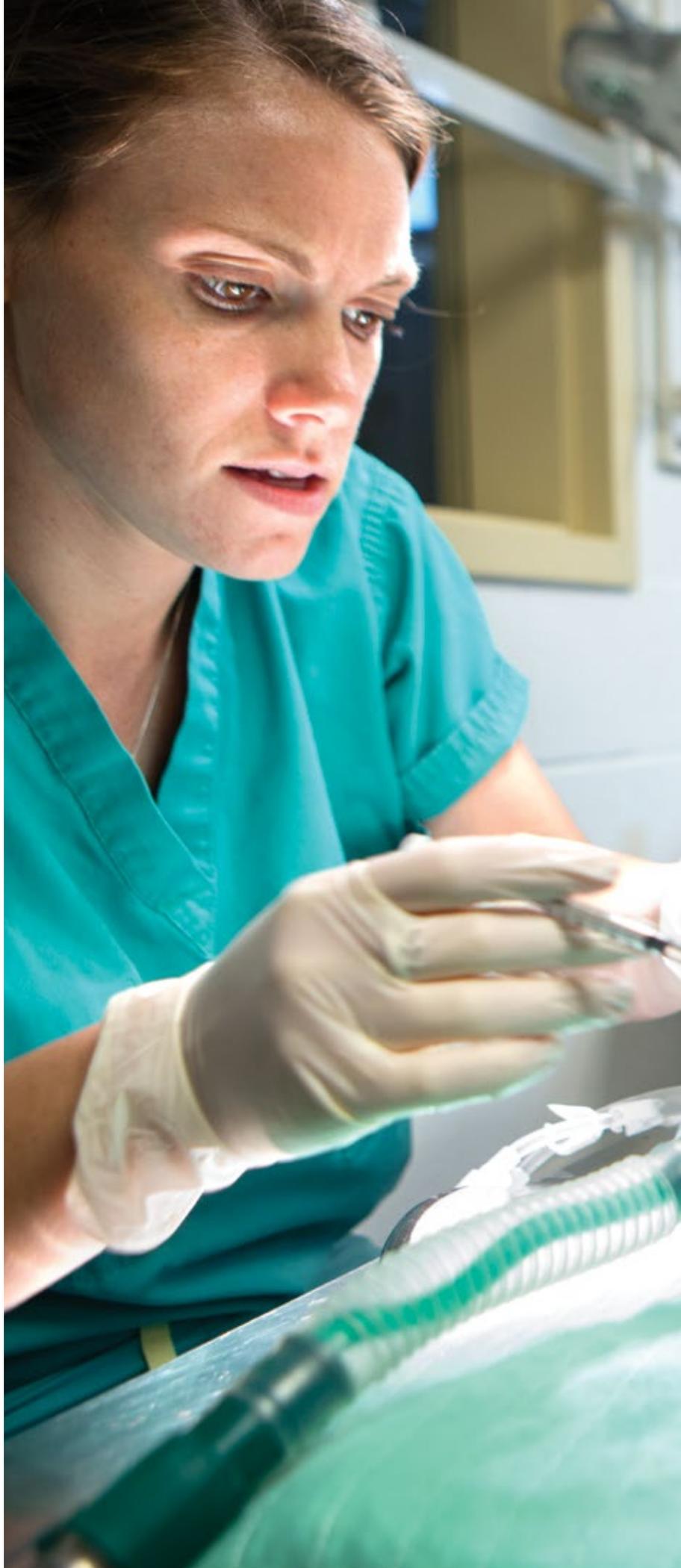
Wild Things

A specialized Vet college hospital treats sick or injured owls, squirrels, porcupines, turtles, and more

BY BETH SAULNIER

→ **BOBCAT** Sara Childs-Sanford, DVM '99 (right), and an intern prep a patient for surgery to repair fractures from being hit by a car.

PHOTO: ROBERT BARKER/UREL







↑ **BEAVER** After their mother was killed, a litter of kits was brought to the center to be hand-fed until they could be transferred to a wildlife rehabilitator.

→ **RED-TAILED HAWK** Wild birds often receive eye drops containing anti-inflammatory or antibiotic drugs to treat traumatic injuries or diseases such as West Nile virus.



↓ **PAINTED TURTLE** Multiple fractures from being hit by a car required extensive shell repair.



At a veterinary hospital near campus, the patients have suffered all manner of misadventure, from accidental poisonings to collisions with cars. But in many ways, these are the lucky ones—sick or injured wild animals who've been rescued by good Samaritans and brought to a specialized facility run by the College of Veterinary Medicine, where faculty, staff, and students work tirelessly to heal them.

Located on Hungerford Hill a few minutes' drive from the main Vet campus, the Janet L. Swanson Wildlife Health Center treats an array of creatures, from bald eagles to rattlesnakes to bear cubs. "It's never dull here," says Sara Childs-Sanford, DVM '99, an assistant professor of zoological medicine and the center's chief of service. "Every day is different. We see such a wide variety of species—

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About 65 percent of the center's caseload is avian, and on this afternoon in late September, most of the cages—covered by towels to keep the residents calm—are occupied by feathered patients. There's an ovenbird that struck a gym window; a house sparrow that got stuck in a backyard suet feeder; and several birds (barred

owl, red-tailed hawk, bald eagle) recovering from wing surgery. "I'm so happy to see you standing, buddy," Childs-Sanford whispers to the eagle, then explains: "He's waiting for his fish."

An opossum with a large wound on its back—a suspected chemical burn—has been here for months; a porcupine, rescued by a police officer after being hit by a car near Albany, has had a plate inserted to repair a broken foreleg. "Porcupines are very difficult patients," Childs-Sanford observes. "We usually end up with quills in various places in our clothes." In a nearby room, plastic bins contain dozens of tiny, days-old turtles, while other trays hold soon-to-hatch eggs that were extracted from the bodies of their mothers, who didn't survive being hit by cars. "Our lab has been turned into a turtle farm," Childs-Sanford says with a smile. "If they hatch too late in the season, we'll >



↑ **FOX** A juvenile is intubated for surgery.

→ **BALD EAGLE** Vet tech Tina Hlywa (right) holds a juvenile bird while Cindy Hopf, a current resident in zoological medicine, examines its wing.





↑ **WARBLER** A tiny bird receives oxygen after striking a window.

← **EASTERN COTTONTAIL** An orphaned baby bunny gets a feeding.

↓ **TIMBER RATTLESNAKE** The center routinely implants radio transmitters so the reptiles can be tracked by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation.



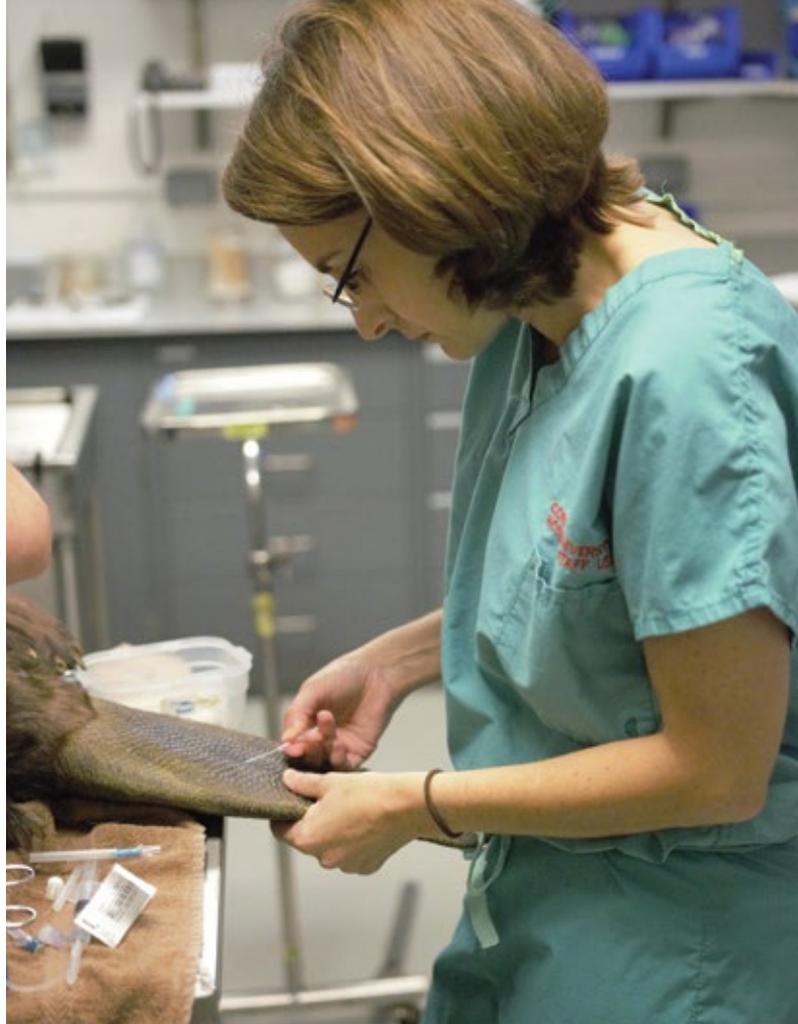
farm them out to vet students to overwinter and release them in the spring.”

Supported largely by donations from the public as well as a small endowment, the center sees some 1,500 patients annually—a number that Childs-Sanford notes has doubled in the past five years, partly due to social media, which has made this and similar facilities more visible. Drawing mainly from Tompkins and surrounding counties—but sometimes getting patients from as far away as the Adirondacks and the Buffalo area—the center treats all native wildlife species with the exception of raccoons, skunks, and bats (which, as official vectors for rabies, could pose too great a risk to students); though it sees the babies of large species like bear and deer, it doesn’t have facilities large enough to contain the adults.

Car strikes are a frequent method of injury—Childs-Sanford notes that “over 50 percent of what we see is due to some type of human activity”—with other common causes including entanglement in soccer nets or fishing line, being poisoned by lead or rodenticide, and getting attacked by housecats. Says Childs-Sanford: “Anytime we have a patient—like that eagle, a really difficult, big patient that has severe trauma—and we can pull that animal through, from coming in completely flat-out to getting it back out onto the lake and catching fish, that’s just amazing.” Center staff also conduct and publish research; their findings include the identification of two novel disease presentations, a parasite in sharp-shinned hawks and a virus in porcupines.

Given the severe injuries that many of its patients have suffered, the center often has to humanely euthanize animals that can’t be treated. But, Childs-Sanford notes, it has a relatively high success rate—and as a teaching hospital, it tackles complex cases that similar facilities don’t, since students can learn from them. Of the patients who do recover, the vast majority are transferred to wildlife rehabilitators who prepare them for release; a small number that can’t survive on their own are placed with zoos, wildlife educators, or groups such as the Cornell Raptor Program. Among its more high-profile >

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↑ **BEAVER** Childs-Sanford inserts a catheter in the animal’s tail.

↓ **BROADWING HAWK** After the bird suffered severe head trauma from being hit by a car, it received fluids via a catheter inserted into its bone.





↑ **SNOWY OWL** Childs-Sanford (left) and Alice Vandemark, the center's vet tech team leader, do a physical on a bird that has suffered trauma.

← **OPOSSUM** A six-week-old joey gets an eye exam.

→ **BEAR** A cub rescued in the Adirondacks is put under general anesthesia before surgery to fix a broken leg.

↓ **PORCUPINE** Hopf does a physical on an orphan raised by a rehabilitator after its mother was hit by a car.





recent patients was a bear cub rescued by state Department of Environmental Conservation officers after being struck by a car in the Adirondacks and taking refuge in a tree. A veterinary orthopaedic surgeon fixed its fractured limb—and the creature was swiftly transported to a rehabilitator for eventual release at age two, when cubs normally leave their mothers. “Once its leg was repaired and it felt better, that was it,” Childs-Sanford recalls. “It was instantaneously aggressive and totally wild.”

Student volunteers cover the hospital’s 24/7 on-call service, and some future DVMs are employed as technicians. Other students spend time at the hospital as a curricular option; Childs-Sanford notes that although half of them don’t plan to specialize in wildlife medicine, it’s still a great learning opportunity. “It has a lot of value as far as teaching basic clinical skills as well as adaptability and flexibility,” she says. “They get to see cases all the way through from beginning to end and do a lot of hands-on things. Using your

knowledge of domestic animals and applying it to non-domesticated animals is a great skill for students to develop.”

Asked to name a particularly gratifying case, second-year student and center technician Helen Chen cites a tiny gosling, the sole survivor of a truck strike that killed its flock. After a boy and his mother brought the animal in from over an hour away, it received fluids and other care, but got worse overnight. For two days, Chen and a vet tried to get it to eat, checking on it every half-hour. “We were on pins and needles,” she recalls. “‘Is it going to make it?’” When she returned for her next shift and found the gosling was no longer in the ICU, she feared the worst—but happily, it had improved enough to be moved. “It was stumbling around, eating on its own,” Chen says. “That’s the kind of learning experience you remember for a long time.” ■

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