



Thousand Oaks resident cares for and rehabilitates squirrels

Squirrel nurslings

By Juan Carlo

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Sharon Baird's soft spot for squirrels began 17 years ago when she was removing cypress trees from her Thousand Oaks backyard.

The trimmers handed her three tiny, naked "rather ugly little things." They were 5-day-old tree squirrels. A research trip to the library has blossomed into a side career taking care of the little creatures. Baird, who also founded the Conejo Free Clinic, is nursing 22 of them right now.

"People always ask me, Why save squirrels? There's millions of them," she said. "The answer is because I think there's value to every life. We are all interrelated."

She swears the squirrels return the favor when she releases them. "The sleepless nights, the scratched hands and the empty bank account are all well worth it when a group is released back into the wild," she said.

Wildlife rehabilitation is no walk in the park. Baird said flatly that "it is not for wimps." It is a profession recognized by state and national organizations that requires permits, 200-plus hours working with the species, classes on things such as fluid therapy and wound management, properly sized and maintained cages, a veterinarian who will work with you and a host of other things.

On top of that, the days are long. Infant wildlife, in particular, eat every couple hours and pay no respect to human clocks. "You thought you gave up those 2 a.m. feedings when your kids grew up," Baird said.

Some of the more unsavory aspects are cleaning cages, washing the feeding utensils and laundry (she puts tiny blankets in cages for warmth). She gets no state or county money for this. She relies on donations from good-hearted people, but even those don't cover the costs of formula, syringes, bottle nipples, bedding, cages and food.

Along with the success stories there is heartache. Sometimes she has to euthanize squirrels that are hurt so badly she can't help them. Other times it's even harder, after weeks of working with them and then realizing that releasing them is not an option. California Department of Fish and Game regulations are clear: Rehabilitators can't keep wildlife that can't be released.

One time, Baird went to Moorpark High School to rescue a squirrel that students "were kicking back and forth to each other like a soccer ball." The squirrel, she reported, recovered.

Some of the squirrels Baird can release wind up at the home of Jim and Betsy Sumner of Thousand Oaks. They've adopted more than 30 squirrels into their yard.

They have names for them such as Rosie and Sampson.

"Every time they're hungry they just come and knock' at the door for a nut, leaving their fingerprints in the glass," Betsy said. The Sumners have taken to carrying walnuts in their pockets for the next possible hungry squirrel. They appreciate Baird's work, noting the squirrels can't fend for themselves.

Seventeen years ago, Baird thought rescuing those three "rather ugly little things" was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but neighbors and friends started bringing her ill and orphaned squirrels, and she was hooked.



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