



Cynthia Westra holds the injured hawk that she cares for in her house. Other injured animals in her house include an owl and a skunk. See related article on page 3A (Jacksonville News staff photo by Jay Meisel)

Jacksonville resident cares for injured wild animals

By Jay Meisel
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It was like being in a war zone, Jacksonville area resident Cynthia Westra recalls of her mission to care for animal victims of the Alaskan oil spill.

Helicopters brought oil-coated animals to a sort of MASH unit last April, Westra said.

Although she has taken care of animals most of her life, she wasn't quite prepared for the Alaskan spill.

"It was a total heart-breaking experience," she said. "You get so numb watching them die.

"You see these animals coming in coated with it (oil) and you know that they're going to die no matter what you do," Westra said.

Despite the experience, Westra, whose family just moved to Jacksonville, continues to care for animals.

Westra cares for injured animals, including some that can't return to the wild.

Besides her family, Westra's

home contains some rather unusual occupants.

In one bedroom is a raccoon, a skunk, a squirrel, a woodpecker, a hawk and an owl. A bathroom contains large birds, including a heron.

Sherman the Fox Squirrel, for example, fell out of a pine tree. He can never go back to survive in the wild.

The hawk was discovered in a chicken coop. When the owner tried to evict the hawk, it injured its wing, in a place that can't be repaired.

"There are days when everything you touch dies," she said.

But on other days, she watches like a mother as the once-injured animals take off into their natural habitat.

Westra considers herself a paramedic for wild animals. In Orlando, Fla., where she lived until recently, people brought her animals.

She is a co-founder of Back to Nature, an organization that treats animals and educates people about them.

Westra hopes to start such a Back to Nature chapter in Jacksonville. She's looking for volunteers who're interested about caring for animals. She has also joined People Against a Chemically Contaminated Environment.

While Westra cares for wild animals, she doesn't believe that's for everyone.

Her raccoon is the only animal that did not come from the wild. She bought it in a pet store.

Westra believes pet stores shouldn't sell wild animals. They never become tame and usually children end up getting hurt, she said.

While Westra doesn't believe children should have wild animals as pets, she believes they should learn about them.

She takes her animals into schools.

When the children view the animals, she said, "you see an instant change. You're turning on respect (for animals) that wasn't there."