

The History of Native Animal Rescue's First Forty Years

August 2020

It was 40 years ago that Native Animal Rescue of Santa Cruz opened its doors to care for injured and orphaned native animals. NAR is one of the 89 wildlife rehabilitation centers licensed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to provide services “to restore to a condition of good health” and release wild animals back into the wild.

In the late 1970s, a group of volunteers and several local veterinarians were spurred to action by the awareness that injured wild animals brought to the Santa Cruz SPCA were usually euthanized because they weren't equipped to care for them. The three founders of NAR—Lisa Leask, Michele Oka, and Ann Brice—decided to “establish a program to aid injured and debilitated wild animals and work to return them to the wild.” They also knew that education about habitat preservation and how to peacefully coexist with wildlife neighbors were key to the health of the local wildlife.

From 1978 to 1980, they visited the most successful wildlife centers in California, studied the procedures for launching a non-profit organization, obtained permits from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (then “Fish and Game”), did six months of hands-on bird and land-mammal training at Wildlife Rescue, Inc. in Mountain View, and built their network of local experts including veterinarians, UCSC researchers and educators, the local Fish and Game warden, and wildlife biologists.

They negotiated for space with the Santa Cruz SPCA, then on 7th Avenue, and opened NAR in June 1980. On the day Native Animal Rescue received its first animal, anonymously dropped off in a large box, Lisa Leask peeled back the flaps only to receive a punch in the forehead by a Great Blue Heron. In honor of being NAR's first rescue, the Great Blue Heron became and still is the symbol of Native Animal Rescue.

According to Lisa Leask, during those first two years, “Each day brought new challenges, hard decisions, and ongoing education. NAR gained the support of the animal professionals in the area as well as backing by the community and the regulating agencies.” In the first year, NAR cared for 1,200 animals represented by 122 different species, mostly birds.

In 1983, Tricia Wilson began a 19-year career with NAR. For the next dozen years, NAR continued at the SPCA and for many of those years, Tricia was the Operations Manager. NAR grew and evolved to meet the needs of the Santa Cruz community. In addition to the intake room, aviaries were added, a seabird pool, various kennels, and a padded room for fawns to muffle the sounds of barking dogs.

NAR nurtured its collaborations with other wildlife centers, each with its different skill sets and resources, to provide the best care possible to the numerous species received. For example, after being stabilized at NAR, seabirds, and water birds are transferred to International Bird Rescue where they specialize in these types of birds and have enormous flight cages and pools.

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As awareness grew of our wildlife neighbors, more animals were rescued. In response, more volunteers were recruited and trained to care for baby birds, squirrels, raccoons, and opossums at their homes. For some of these home rehabbers, this turned into a decades-long commitment and some are still rehabbing orphans today. With years of experience, these rehabbers have become experts on the species they rehabilitate.

This was the case for Molly Richardson who began her career with NAR in 1991 when she volunteered to care for baby birds in her home. Molly went on to become the Director of Native Animal Rescue and dedicated the rest of her life to caring for wildlife.

In 1995, due to a lack of funding, NAR closed its doors at the SPCA. But as one door closed, another door opened. Molly and Tricia relocated NAR's reception room to Molly's garage at 1855 17th Avenue. As before, stabilized animals were transported to volunteer rehabbers throughout the county who cared for the animals on their own properties until they were ready to be released back into the wild.

By 2002, Tricia had trained Lupin and Zoe Egan, Molly's 20-year-old twin granddaughters, into skilled wildlife animal technicians who work at NAR to this day. Confident that she was leaving NAR in very capable hands, Tricia moved on to her present position as the Visitor Center Coordinator at Elkhorn Slough.

Over the last 40 years, the number of NAR patients has steadily increased. Currently, NAR cares for an average of 2,500 animals per year representing 132 species. To accommodate these animals, we have built numerous aviaries and outside enclosures at the 17th Ave. facility and on the properties of our home rehabbers who live adjacent to wildlife habitat. We are in the process of building a HUGE raptor aviary and hope to have it completed in time to have it be part of our 40-year virtual celebration.

Fortunately, this growth has been matched by financial support from a growing number of individual donors, bag programs at New Leaf, Staff of Life, and Wild Roots, two local private foundations, and corporate matching funds. The increase in funding now supports our payroll of three full-time animal technicians. Molly's daughter, Eve, volunteers as executive director in the spirit of her mother, Molly.

As we reach our 40th anniversary we express our gratitude to our board of directors for their wise guidance and to our extended team of volunteers, rescuers including 911 dispatch, animal control, law enforcement officers, fire and park departments, and of course our wonderfully compassionate and generous fellow citizens who are the foundation of Native Animal Rescue of Santa Cruz County.