Less than two weeks after an area-wide wildlife rehabilitation center opened a new state-of-the-art headquarters in Bastrop County, someone brought in a majestic symbol of America: a bald eagle. It was injured and underweight.

X-rays taken at the spacious Austin Wildlife Rescue facility outside Elgin in April showed a BB pellet lodged in the eagle’s right wing. Veterinarian Susan Skyler’s exam found the adult male eagle was suffering from parasites and mites. Its wing wound was old and minor, but shooting a bald eagle is a federal offense punishable by up to $250,000 in fines or two years in prison.

“It’s very frustrating,” said Derek Rennspies, the Milam County game warden who rescued the eagle from a creek bed near the small town of Buckholts after a landowner found it. “The (BB) wound was so old, there were really no leads to go on. Bald eagles travel so much, there was really no way to tell where that eagle came from.”

The game warden is just one of thousands of public workers and private citizens who contact Austin Wildlife Rescue for help in saving injured, ill or orphaned animals. The nonprofit runs a widespread operation that expects to aid 6,600 animals this year — an average of 18 a day — at its new Bastrop County headquarters. (Austin Wildlife Rescue has turned its former animal rehab center in east Austin into its main animal intake center. Every evening, volunteers drive that day’s newly arrived animals to the far roomier Bastrop County rehab center.)

Austin Wildlife Rescue is not a 24-hour operation. But “they are always willing to come out and meet me when I’m in a bind,” Rennspies said.

At its new location near Elgin, Austin Wildlife Rescue will help injured, ill or orphaned creatures — great and small — at a rate of about 6,600 a year.

Story by Denise Gamino
Photos by Sarah Beal
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the game warden said. “Every time I call
them, they help me.”

Austin Wildlife Rescue helps, wild crea-
tures great and small — from bobcats and
deer to blink-and-you’ll-miss-them-hum-
mingbirds, baby turtles no bigger than sil-
ver dollars, newborn squirrels that haven’t
opened their eyes, wounded beavers, and
even the occasional porcupine or skunk.

“You never know what’s coming in,” said
Hayley Hudnall, the organization’s execu-
tive director.

Austin Wildlife Rescue is the oldest and
largest wild animal rehabilitation center in
the booming Austin region. It began in 1977
as a shoestring volunteer hotline. Now it
has spread its own wings after 15 years of saving
money in a building fund. It had outgrown its
center in a former three-bedroom house in
east Austin. So in 2014, it used donations to
buy 6.7 acres about 14 miles south of Elgin to
build a large, modern rehabilitation facility.

“It’s a dream we’ve had for so long,” Hud-
nall said.

The new, 655,000 center has a
7,200-square-foot main building, half of
which is temperature-controlled with cen-
tral air and heat. Bluebonnet Electric Coop-
erative provides the electricity. For the first
time, the center has a surgery suite for volun-
teer veterinarians, a food preparation area, a
quarantine space for contagious animals and
individual rooms for each type of animal. Outdoors are a tall, 100-foot raptor flight
cage, roomy deer pens, and cages for small
mammals like opossums, foxes and skunks.
Foundation grants helped pay for cages.

The mission of the wildlife center is rescue,
rehabilitate and release. Volunteers recall the
day a few years ago when a Ford pickup col-
lided with a low-flying red-tailed hawk and the
center in Bastrop County was a bald
eagle that had been shot with a BB
pellet. The eagle was sent to a raptor
rehabilitator in East Texas because the
center’s raptor cage was not yet

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Wildlife rescue by the numbers

EVERY 20 MINUTES
How often baby songbirds must be fed,
from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m.

3 TIMES A DAY
How often pigeons and doves are fed
because they store food in a muscular
pouch before digestion.

EVERY 4 HOURS
How often a baby squirrel must be fed.

$300
Cost to rehabilitate a baby raccoon for
6 months.

Want to help?
Wildlife Rescue’s wish list:

- Bounty paper towels
- Bleach
- Dish detergent
- Laundry detergent
- Black oil sunflower seed
- Wild bird seed
- Fresh fruits and veggies
- Plastic dog crates
- Rodent wheels
- Walmart gift cards

One of the first
animals to arrive
at the new rescue
center in Bastrop County was a bald

eagle that had been

shot with a BB
pellet. The eagle
was sent to a raptor

rehabilitator in East
Texas because the
center’s raptor
cage was not yet

finished. The
eagle will be
released where it
was found.

Courtenay Antonucci, at right, an animal
care technician at the new Bastrop County
rehab center, marks labels for syringes of
formula for the nest shift of workers who will
feed the animals. Above, from left, a rescued
squirrel, a young opossum, a bald eagle, a
baby skunk and a 1-month-old gray fox.

Fun facts

- In 2017, Austin Wildlife Rescue
took in 7,000 animals, a record-

breaking number prompted by
Hurricane Harvey and a mild
winter. The center received 400
animals in one week, including
250 squirrels. A rescue group
from Amarillo helped out by
taking 40 of those squirrels.

- Baby skunks don’t spray
humans, and most adult skunks
spray only as a last resort to
protect themselves. Skunks
pounce with their front feet as
a warning before they spray.
However, the Austin Wildlife
Rescue crew gets sprayed when
releasing a skunk to the wild.

- Porcupines are not as
aggressive as people think. But
wildlife rescue workers must wear
thick gloves and drape a towel
around porcupines when handling
them.

- Baby hummingbirds must be
fed three times every hour with
nectar from a medicine dropper.
Opossums eat bugs, including ticks that can carry diseases. They eat snakes that could be poisonous. They eat dead things, so they’re cleaning up the environment.

“So having an opossum in your yard is never a bad thing. They have such a low body temperature, they rarely carry rabies even though most people think they can be rabid. They’ve been around since the dinosaurs, so they’re doing something right. And they’re marsupials; all their babies are in their pouch — up to 13 at one time.”

The public also may not understand the importance of rescuing vultures. “Vultures are cleaning up the environment,” Hudnall said. “It would be pretty stinky around here, with a lot more roadkill without the vultures.”

And some people may consider squirrels to be nuisance animals that chew up patio furniture. But they are sowing trees that provide shade, food and clean air for humans. “They are good tree planters,” Hudnall said. “All the pecans, all the acorns—they are not going back to all the nuts they buried, so they are planting all those trees for us.”

Once animals are healthy, wildlife rescue workers release them back to the wild, but not on the property near Elgin. The animals are released on private property with permission from the landowner. The organization has about 50 release sites far outside city limits on land that is at least 100 acres and has a water source that never runs dry. Deer require a release site of 1,000 acres. Release sites are rotated and never used more than once a year. Volunteers sometimes drive up to two hours to get to a release site.

Tito, a 35-pound African spurred tortoise, is a permanent resident of the new rescue center. He was found in Wimberley, but no one claimed him, so Austin Wildlife Rescue now takes him on the road for educational programs. At right: A month-old fawn can’t wait to get some of the tasty formula offered by a technician.

Khanh Phan, an animal care technician, prepares syringes of formula and medication for the next feeding cycle. With so many tiny mouths to feed, the technicians rarely get a break between feeding and caring for the hungry animals.

About the volunteers
About 100 volunteers — about half of whom are always working or available — help out each year. Volunteers logged 6,000 hours in 2018. Twenty volunteers are licensed wildlife rehabilitators. New volunteers are accepted in December and in the spring. Volunteers must be 18 or older and willing to work two-to-three hours per week, in the morning, afternoon or evening during the busy season (March-September) or morning or afternoon in the off-season (October-February). Applications for volunteers are available on the organization’s website in December and in the spring.

Animal safety warning
What wildlife rescue workers want you to know:

- People who put out rodent bait not only poison rats and mice, but also other animals that eat the bait, such as hawks, owls, foxes, and bobcats. This spring, Austin Wildlife Rescue saved a baby great horned owl that was sick from poisoning. Glue traps for insects and rodents also capture birds, snakes and lizards.

- Research shows that a wild animal that is trapped and relocated has an 80 percent chance of dying because it is unfamiliar with the new environment and doesn’t know where to find food and water or how to cross roads in the area.

- Never rescue a wild animal and keep it as a possible pet. State and federal laws protect nearly all wild animals. It is against the law to keep an animal or bird or its nests, feathers, or eggs without permits.

Austin Wildlife Rescue to release it. “The bird will be released back where I found it,” Rennspies said. “We protect the natural resources,” he said. “We want our future generations to enjoy the same natural resources that the past and current generations have enjoyed.”

Back to the wild: some curious raccoons being released after getting healthy at Austin Wildlife Rescue. The center has about 50 private property release sites of at least 100 acres each, far away from populated areas. Photo courtesy of Austin Wildlife Rescue.