

Wildlife Rehab

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By Melanie Lenart

Dying birds have a specific smell, an acrid one that stinks of failure. I got a reminder of that whiff in late April, when I came across a baby sparrow in my backyard. The sight of the baby bird, feathered but too young to fly, brought to my mind the haunting scent of several failed efforts in the distant past to care for injured birds.

So I was thrilled to hear from a friend that there's a place in town – Forever Wild Animal Rehabilitation Center – where knowledgeable people care for baby birds along with a host of other young and injured animals. After being assured that the group held no biases against sparrows, I dropped off my ward at an in-town pick-up point, Valley Animal Hospital at 22nd Street near Swan.

While a technician led a toddling beagle in to see the vet, the receptionist checked in another set of wild birds, two freshly hatched and featherless babies the size of thimbles. Another one remained egg-bound, in a light brown speckled casing. By comparison, my little sparrow looked hearty and ready to rumble. After hearing that volunteers from Forever Wild were expected within the hour, I felt confident this was one bird who would survive my efforts to care for it.

My hopes proved valid about a week and a half later when I checked in with Forever Wild. Founder Darlene Braastad informed me that the little sparrow had survived and thrived. In fact, Braastad had already released her in the area around the sanctuary, located on a dirt road off I-10 and Wilmot.

It's a lovely place for a bird to grow up, as I found out during a May visit. Braastad and her husband, Brad, had turned their 2½-acre plot on the outskirts of Tucson into not only a home for themselves, but one for hundreds of animals as well.

Mountain views form the backdrop, while eucalyptus and mesquite trees and various roofs provide shade for a menagerie of raptors, songbirds, geese and ducks. She even cares for pigeons, noting that these "superdoves" can make great pets – hint, hint. The center often ends up with misguided gifts, such as Christmas ducks, "After-Easter Bunnies," and animals – like the African goose that nibbled on my shoes – that are so accustomed to humans they turn to begging if released.

Many of the injured or domesticated animals can earn their keep by fostering incoming babies, such as the female bobcat who had been raised by humans for seven months before coming to the center. Currently, she shares her room-sized cage with half a dozen young bobcats approaching the age of release.

"Don't get too close," Braastad warned me, as I inched toward the bobcats, lulled by their resemblance to my own tortoiseshell tabby. "If one of them scratches you, I'll have to have it killed."

That's not a rule that someone who rescues pigeons would like to follow, to be sure. It's a dictate of Arizona Game and Fish, the agency that licenses wildlife sanctuaries like Braastad's and a couple of others in town. The state agency lays down the law and runs the required registration process, but provides no financial support.

Support comes from the Braastads and various patrons who donate to the group, a non-profit organization. Like many NGOs, Forever Wild is forever struggling to stay afloat financially.

And they can always use good help. Thirty-five volunteers work for the group, but a peak in spring and summer strains the resources, Braastad explained. As we chatted, she fed formula through a plastic syringe to a series of bunnies, a still-stripeless baby raccoon, and a baby ground squirrel.

Still, many of the baby animals really didn't need to be "rescued," Braastad notes. People, especially kids, can be too quick to assume that a baby animal has been abandoned. As guidelines on the group's website note, it's often best to wait and see if a parent is nearby or will come back. Rabbits, for instance, only feed their babies at night.

Even my sparrow might have fared fine if I had located the nest or placed it on a branch nearby, based on the instructions Braastad shared on paper but not in an admonishment. Still, I felt better knowing it was safely away from my cat. Anyway, it gave me a reason to see for myself this desert oasis for wildlife. And to smell it.

Judging from my nose as well as my eyes, the birds and other animals at Forever Wild are thriving.

*Author: Melanie Lenart is an environmental scientist and writer based in Tucson, and author of Life in the Hothouse: How a Living Planet Survives Climate Change. For more information on [**Forever Wild**](#), please call 574-3579.*