



Safe Harbor

As Cape Cod grows increasingly crowded, an HSUS way station for sick and injured wildlife is becoming a strong advocate for living in harmony with fellow species

by JENNIFER WEEKS

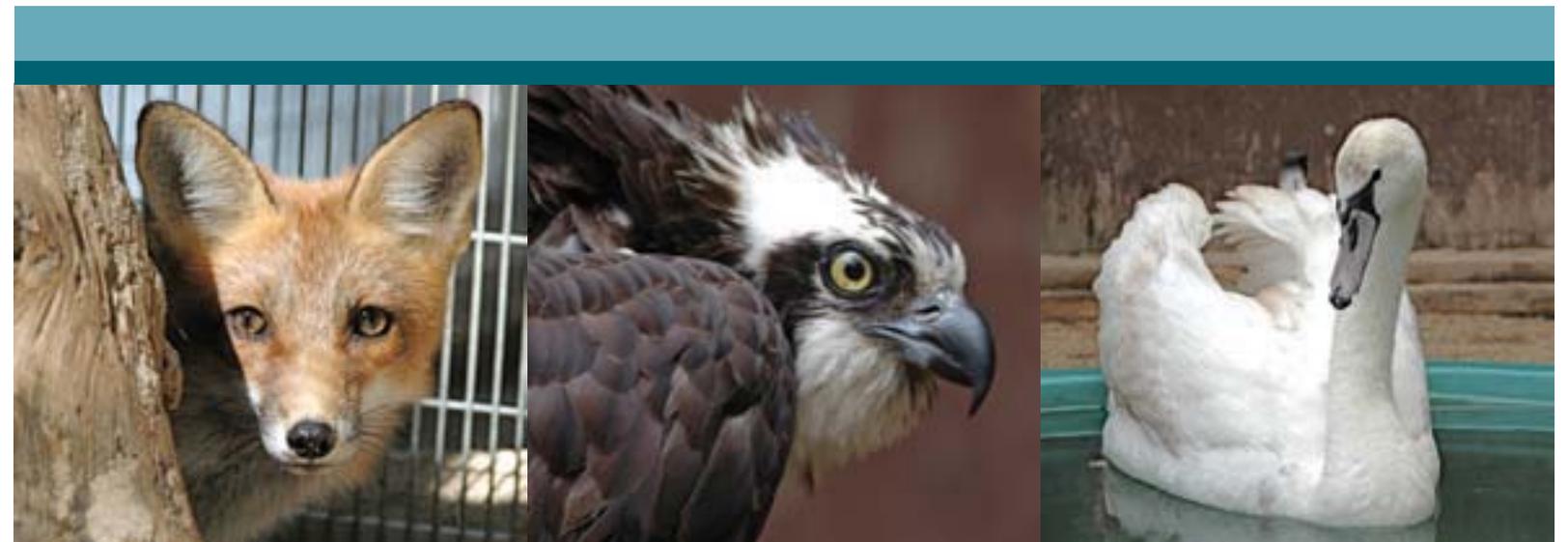
A drive through Barnstable, Mass., a picture-perfect New England town on Cape Cod's north shore, provides a glimpse into the intimate relationship among humans and their wild neighbors. Gray-shingled homes peer out over backyard ponds and salt marshes. A red-tailed hawk perches in an oak tree, scanning for prey. Gray squirrels poke into the crevices of stone walls, searching for leftover winter food caches.

On this damp, overcast day in early April, a chill lingers in the air. But spring breeding season is under way, so birds and animals are staking out territories and foraging with new energy. Homeowners are out and about too, raking yards and tilling their gardens. All this activity leads to human-animal encounters. And at The HSUS's Cape Wildlife Center, a 5-acre former horse farm set back from Barnstable's main street, phone calls are already coming in: "There are raccoons in my attic." "I mowed over a rabbit's nest in my lawn." "I cut down a dead tree and found baby squirrels inside it. What do I do?"

The center has answers. Since 1995, the facility—operated in partnership with The Fund for Animals—has provided care 365

days a year for sick, injured, and orphaned wildlife from Cape Cod and adjoining areas. In a typical year, the center may care for more than 2,000 animals representing 135 species, including skunks, foxes, coyotes, squirrels, opossums, mice, raccoons, rabbits, fishers, and turtles, plus many types of songbirds, raptors, and waterbirds. "You never know what's coming in day to day—it could be anything," says animal care technician Heather Fone.

Proximity to nature and the sea has drawn people to Cape Cod for centuries. Henry David Thoreau, who traveled the Cape from end to end, called it "the bared and bended arm of Massachusetts behind which the State stands on her guard boxing with northeast storms, and, ever and anon, heaving up her Atlantic adversary from





the lap of earth.” Measuring 65 miles long and 20 miles wide at its broadest, the Cape looks like a peninsula but is really an island, separated from the mainland by the Cape Cod Canal. This narrow span contains many types of habitat, including forests, grasslands, bogs, marshes, and sand dunes. It juts out into the Atlantic Flyway, a major north-south migration route for many types of birds.

Cape Cod’s year-round population has boomed in recent decades, from just over 70,000 in 1960 to about 220,000. That figure roughly triples in summer when vacationers flock to its beaches. Development is consuming open space and bringing humans and wildlife ever closer together. In this setting, the CWC’s role is broader than just treating injured animals: It also advocates for wildlife and works to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts.

“The Cape hasn’t lost many native species since colonial times, and I think most Cape Codders realize that protecting animals means protecting their natural heritage,” says Theresa Barbo, who became the center’s director last summer. A longtime Cape resident, Barbo is the author of six books, including histories of Cape Cod Bay and Nantucket Sound, which bound the Cape to the north and south. “But the ecosystem here is very fragile, and there aren’t a lot of places for animals to go.”

Nearly every animal who comes to the CWC goes straight to the clinic, a wing of the main house that was once a solarium.

There’s a steel examining table and lots of medical equipment, plus other tools of the trade—hoods of various sizes for calming birds, and blow darts and syringes for sedating animals in emergency situations in the field, sometimes at the request of local police. “Injured animals are scared, and you have to know how to handle them safely,” says staff veterinarian Roberto Aguilar, known to employees and volunteers as Dr. Bob.

Bearded and jovial, Aguilar has spent his career working with wildlife. He grew up and attended college in Mexico, then interned in wildlife medicine at Oklahoma State University and was the first clinical resident at the University of Minnesota’s raptor center. From 1992 through 2005, he was senior veterinarian at the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans, helping to care for animals after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city (but largely passed over the zoo). After holding positions in Chile, Arizona, and New Zealand, Aguilar joined the Cape Wildlife Center in 2009.

Barnstable may seem tame by comparison, but Aguilar rattles off a list of daily threats to Cape wildlife. “Roads are narrow here, and they become impassable with summer traffic, so animals get hit,” he says. “A lot of homeowners plant lawns on their property and remove native plants that provide habitat, cover, and food for wildlife. Trash in the environment lures animals toward humans and homes.” And it poses other dangers: Aguilar displays a collec-

TOP: DEAVV; GIANNELLA/DE AGOSTINI/PICTURE LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES; SQUIRREL: DAVID SOKOL; ALL OTHERS: HEATHER FONE/THE HSUS



tion of hooks and lures that staff have removed from birds' wings and animals' guts. He also shows a bird's nest with monofilament fishing line woven into it—a tangling hazard for chicks.

The animal ward, a former multicar garage, was converted in 2010 into a bright, airy recovery area. On the ground floor, former car bays now house adult mammals and birds, plus reptiles and amphibians. The second floor has nurseries for juvenile mammals and young birds. A large erasable board in the ground-floor hallway charts individual cases, listing each creature's species, problem, diet, recent cleanings and feedings, and special notes. Keeping this information current is a constant process, especially during peak periods when the center is busy 14 hours a day.

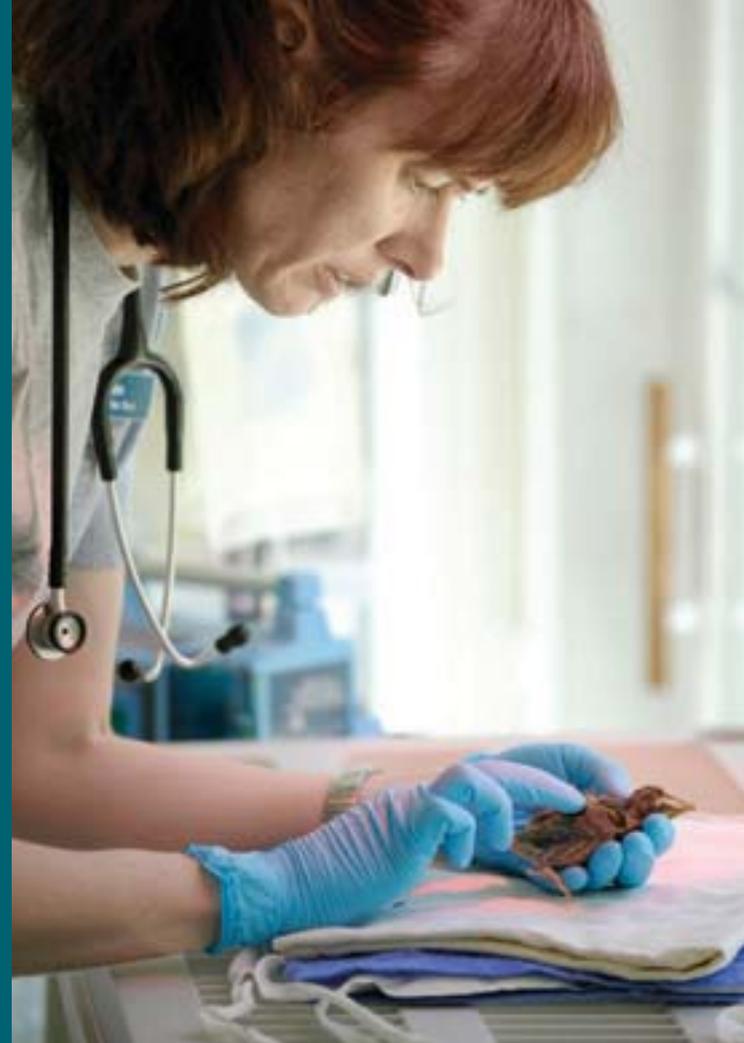
THE DAY'S PATIENTS

Upstairs in the mammal ward, new volunteer Faith Augat is hand-feeding a female squirrel kit brought in by a local resident who found a litter in a downed tree. First the woman tried for three days to feed the infant squirrels herself, but all except this one died. "People don't realize that you can't feed newborn animals cow's milk—they need electrolytes at first for hydration, and then special formula," says Fone.

Indeed, the kit, who is under a month old and has not opened her eyes yet, is getting a specially formulated milk replacer made for young squirrels, opossums, and cottontail rabbits. After Augat finishes feeding her young charge from a small syringe, she gently wipes the squirrel's mouth and puts her back in an incubator, next to a fleece cap that substitutes for other squirrels' fur. The kit burrows into the cap, then starts wrestling with it, instinctively feeling for the other bodies that she normally would be rolling around with. "She needs a buddy. It's very sad when siblings die," Fone observes.

In one downstairs ward, a diminutive eastern screech owl squints into the light from the depths of a pet carrier. A woman found the owl lying in the middle of Barnstable's winding main road with a head injury, possibly after hitting a car in flight. Stitching has left the owl with a lopsided ear tuft, and one of her eyes is still bloodshot, but the little bird is all attention when Fone arranges a rolled-up fleece blanket in her hutch and props three defrosted dead mice on it. Lunch is served.

Two tanks on the adjoining table hold eastern box turtles, classified as a species of special concern in Massachusetts, where



Clockwise from top left: Veterinary technician Kate Rollenhagen examines an injured robin nesting brought to the center by a local resident. ❖ Opossums are among the 135 species cared for at the center in a typical year. Babies are housed in humidity-controlled incubators and given fleece pouches for hiding. ❖ A baby robin is hand-fed using a syringe. ❖ Eastern box turtles are a species of special concern in Massachusetts, where their habitats are being developed. This one came to the center missing a rear foot, while another had been run over by a car. ❖ These fishing hooks and lures were stuck in the wings and bodies of birds and other animals until Cape Wildlife Center staff removed them. ❖ By April, center volunteers had already coached Cape residents in reneating several dozen wayward baby squirrels. But some orphans still made their way to the center. Here, volunteer Howie Watson helps a 4-week-old with his 9 a.m. feeding.



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— JOY FRANKIO, ANIMAL CARE TECHNICIAN

many of their woodland and marsh habitats are being developed. One was run over by a car and has a dull crusty brown patch on his shell that is still healing; the other has a rear foot missing for unknown reasons. Aguilar is also treating another threatened reptile: a diamondback terrapin with an eye infection, back for his second visit this year. The terrapin hails from Long Pasture, a wildlife sanctuary across the road run by Mass Audubon, the largest conservation organization in New England. To give these rare marsh dwellers a head start, Mass Audubon raises hatchlings and gives them to local schools to raise for future release to the wild. “They’re gull food otherwise,” says Fone. The CWC works regularly with the sanctuary, treating its sick and injured animals and conducting releases there.

The most eye-catching patient is a mute swan who was found 70 miles away on the mainland, emaciated due to severe frostbite in her feet that kept her from foraging. Now she’s gaining strength, and her feet have healed enough to let her stand and move about. Her digestive system is still recovering, so she is fed cereal meal floating in a bowl of water, which is easier to stomach than dry food. The swan has spent the morning reacclimating to the outdoors in one of three large waterfowl pens behind the main house. But it’s feeding time, so volunteer Brian White puts a calming hood over her head, wraps her body in a blanket, and carries her back to her private bay in the animal ward. The bird gives a long guttural hiss when the hood comes off, but then starts gracefully scooping mouthfuls from her feeding bowl.

Staff aim to treat, rehabilitate, and release animals within 90 days. “We give them everything we can, and then we let them go. The sooner we get them out, the better off they’ll be,” says animal care technician Joy Frankio, who coordinates releases. “They’ll learn about foraging and predators. It’s kinder to them. They’re not ours to keep.”

Frankio will consult with state wildlife officials to determine where to put the box turtles, since one of them can’t be returned to his habitat, which has been developed. Finding release sites can be tricky: She researches potential areas to be sure they offer enough

water, appropriate food sources, and space to survive and stay wild. She is required to confer with the state when releasing animals who are considered potential rabies vectors, and state officials also attend releases of predators they want to keep distant from humans, such as foxes, coyotes, and fishers. The swan will be an easier case, since she belongs to a common species—and as Frankio points out, “birds fly off and go wherever they want.”

The center’s work extends beyond the animal ward. Fone, Frankio, and the 55 volunteers spend much of their time teaching Cape Codders how to deal with minor wildlife issues directly instead of bringing animals to the center. By their count, they have already coached neighbors through renesting several dozen baby squirrels this spring. “We tell people to put them in a box lined with an old T-shirt, wrap a soda bottle filled with warm water in another T-shirt, and put it in as a warmer. Then put the box as close to the downed tree as possible, and leave the area,” says Fone. “The mother will come and take the kits one at a time to a new nest.” Similarly, young birds on the ground usually have not fallen from their nests but are learning to fly, and parents will fetch them if left alone.

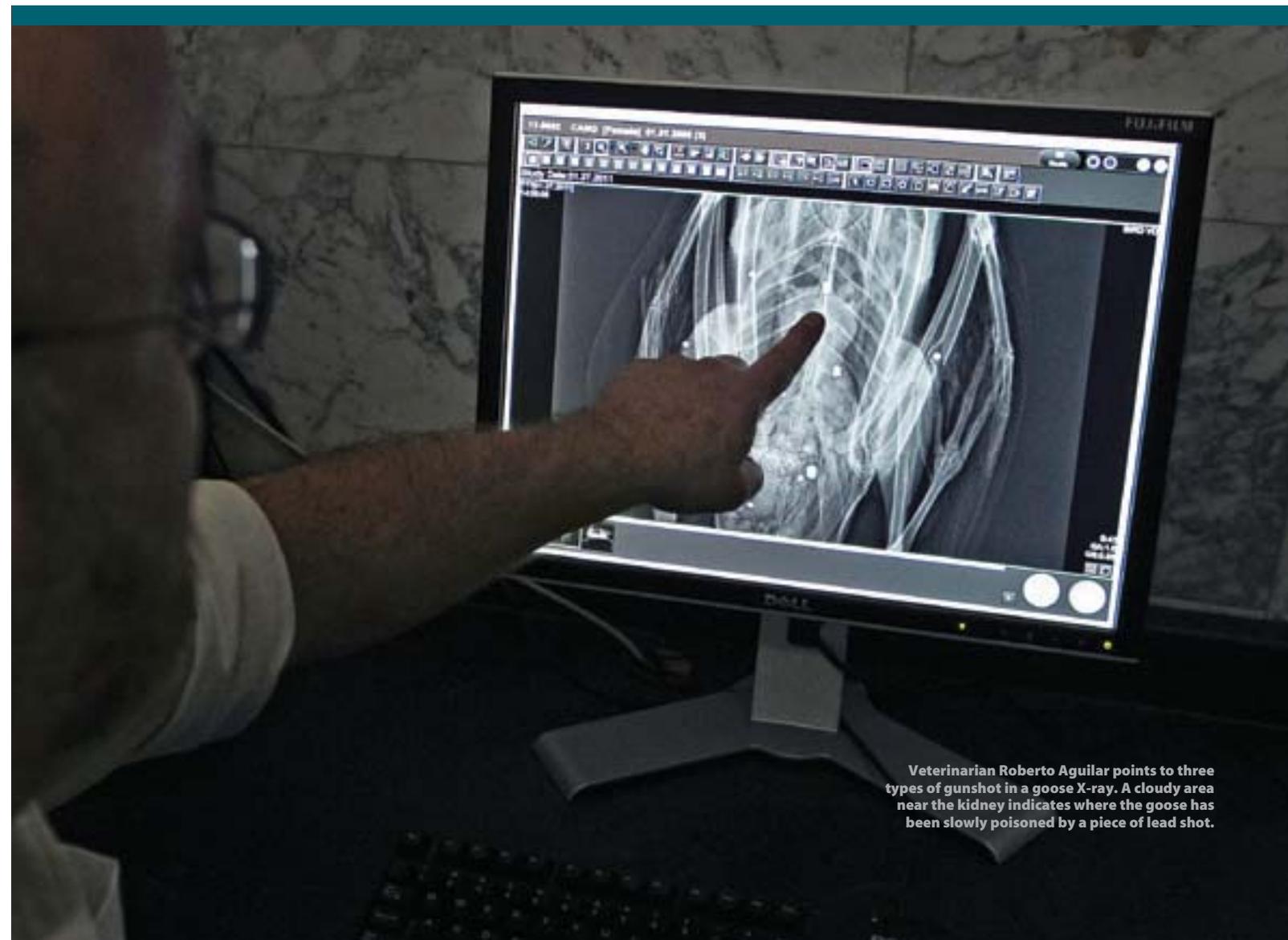
In some cases, callers are reluctant to handle even tiny creatures themselves; in others, staffers have to push well-intentioned rescuers to return animals to the outdoors. “If you follow up and ask how it’s

going, they get comfortable and see that they can manage it. When it works, people get all excited—they feel as though they’ve given the animals another chance,” says Frankio.

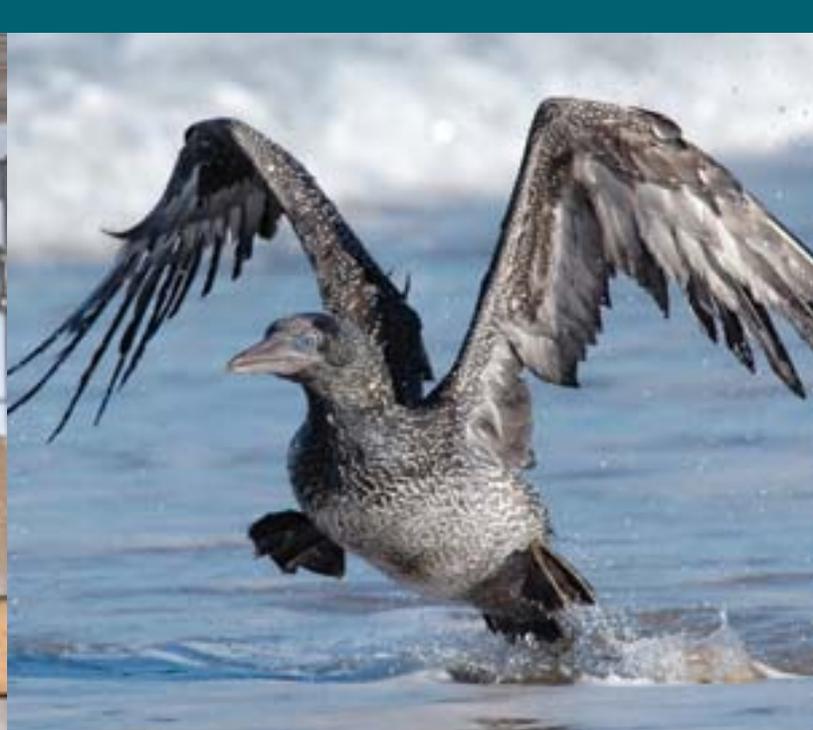
Other cases are better handled at the CWC. The center has modified an entire barn for species that can carry rabies, and everyone who works there has been vaccinated. Inside the barn, a full nursery for baby raccoons (the center rehabilitates dozens each year) features incubators, tabletop wire cages for bottle-fed kits, and tall cages for weaned young. A sign on the door admonishes: “Keep voices low. No talking to the raccoons,” a policy intended to prevent the animals from developing positive associations with human voices. Coyote pups go in a former box stall, and there’s a pen for ducklings on the second floor. Like the swan, mammals nearly ready for release go through acclimation in large outdoor pens designed for various species’ needs: Bird pens have swimming pools filled and drained through underground pipes, and raccoon pens have logs for climbing.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the basement of the main house, veterinary technician Kate Rollenhagen is doing a necropsy on a wild turkey who has just died—standard practice when an animal expires from unknown



Veterinarian Roberto Aguilar points to three types of gunshot in a goose X-ray. A cloudy area near the kidney indicates where the goose has been slowly poisoned by a piece of lead shot.



Left: A nursery for baby raccoons features incubators, tabletop cages for bottle-fed kits, and tall cages for weaned young. Right: The story of this northern gannet inspires animal care technician Heather Fone, who photographed his release. “He just charged off and never looked back,” she says.

causes. “You usually get surprised in some way,” Rollenhagen says. The bird was brought in with head trauma after being hit by a car; Aguilar and Rollenhagen treated her injury, but the turkey refused to eat and died after several days. Carefully dissecting the bird’s body and noting the condition of various organs, Rollenhagen finds two old puncture wounds in her shoulders (perhaps a gunshot that passed straight through) and signs of gout. “She’s old, and clearly a lot of things had happened to her. Getting hit by the car probably was the last straw,” Rollenhagen concludes.

Some creatures have seen worse. Aguilar brings up an image on a digital X-ray screen of a Canada goose who harbored three kinds of gunshot: BBs, .22-caliber, and lead buckshot. Most of the pellets were in parts of the bird that did not interfere with organ function, and in fact the goose was treated and survived. But the good news may be short-lived, as one piece of lead shot lodged in a kidney. “You can see that the area is cloudy. That means there’s a lot of circulation around it, so this goose is being slowly poisoned without ever ingesting lead,” Aguilar says, shaking his head.

Beyond treating animals’ immediate needs, the CWC seeks to improve wildlife medicine. “We want to understand why some species seem to be doing well and then crash,” says Aguilar. “Rehabilitation can generate lots of information about injuries and illnesses that are affecting animals. It’s also important to track wildlife illnesses because many zoonotic diseases like Ebola, hantavirus, and West Nile virus have crossed from wildlife to humans.”

Aguilar and Barbo want to develop the center into a veterinary teaching hospital over the next several years. The center already hosts up to 14 interns at a time, mainly in the summer. Some are ecologists or conservation biologists who want to learn about animal medicine; many are veterinary students. “Vet school is an

expensive career that tends to push you away from working with wildlife,” says Aguilar. “The typical attitude is that wildlife medicine is an unusual field and you’re likely to end up working at a zoo, but we need more specialists.

“There’s very little funding for wildlife rehabilitation—it’s not supported by government, and most rehabilitated animals don’t have major biological value,” he adds. “But it has major social value.”

Barbo is working to raise the CWC’s local profile and strengthen links with other wildlife agencies and conservation groups; the center is a founding member of the Cape Cod Wildlife Collaborative, a coalition of wildlife protection groups, museums, scientific research centers, and land trusts. The CWC sponsors a popular lecture series on Cape Cod ecology topics like the decline and recovery of ospreys, and Barbo would like to promote more research on environmental threats to the wildlife the center treats, such as red tide outbreaks, which can poison waterbirds.

As they continue to dream about long-term plans, staffers also have more immediate concerns on this April day: the spring rush. “It’s a gift to be here,” says Fone, who started as a volunteer before joining the staff. For emphasis, she points to one of the photographs of former patients that line the walls of the animal ward. It’s a northern gannet, shown at release after being treated for a wing injury. The bird is taking flight from the ocean’s surface, seemingly racing over the water, wings bent to power himself into the air, eyes fixed forward. Fone, who snapped the photo, smiles at the memory: “He just charged off and never looked back.” ■



135 species from raccoons to raptors are treated at the Cape Wildlife Center

Jennifer Weeks is a freelance writer living in Watertown, Mass. [Learn more about the Cape Wildlife Center at *humanesociety.org/cape*.](https://www.humanesociety.org/cape)