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Voices

EmergiCare for Critters

BY CORY HATCH

New nonprofit aims to rehabilitate
wildlife injured by human activity



In 2014, Grand Teton National Park wildlife watchers mourned the loss of a cow moose after a tragic accident at the Gros Ventre Campground.

It was late September, mating season, and a crowd of photographers had gathered around the cow and her would-be mate, a large bull. Witnesses say some photographers pressed in too close, prompting the animals to bolt through the campground. The chase ended when the cow moose stepped into a fire grate and broke her leg. Park rangers euthanized the animal with a gunshot.

“The goal is to release all of [the animals] ... We’re not building a sanctuary,” says Lindsay Jones.

Lost in the fracas was the fact that another moose probably died as a result of that accident. The cow moose had a yearling calf. Park officials said at the time that they weren’t sure whether the calf would survive the winter. All told, rangers had no option but to kill the mother and let the calf fend for itself.

This incident, and others like it, struck a chord with local biologists Renee Seidler and Lindsay Jones.

It’s ironic, Renee says, that we live in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, an area renowned for its wildlife, and there are no good options to treat an injured mammal, songbird, or waterfowl. Aside from the Teton Raptor Center in Wilson, Wyoming—which, as the name implies, treats only raptors—it’s 450 miles to the closest wildlife rehabilitation center, located in McCall, Idaho.

“A lot of animals that are injured won’t survive that trip,” Renee says.

To fill the gap, Renee and Lindsay have spent the last few years developing the Teton Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with the goal of opening a facility for injured wildlife. The center will focus on treating wildlife that sustain injuries from human activities or developments in

Teton County, Idaho, and Teton County, Wyoming. Public education is a big component of the mission.

Local wildlife agencies don’t keep track of injured or orphaned wild animals in the region, but the number is likely quite high. Add up all the injured animals from wildlife-vehicle collisions, fence entanglements, power line collisions, and other human sources, and there’s substantial need for a wildlife rehabilitation center, say Renee and Lindsay.

For some context, according to data provided by the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation, in 2015 wildlife-vehicle collisions accounted for 259 wildlife deaths

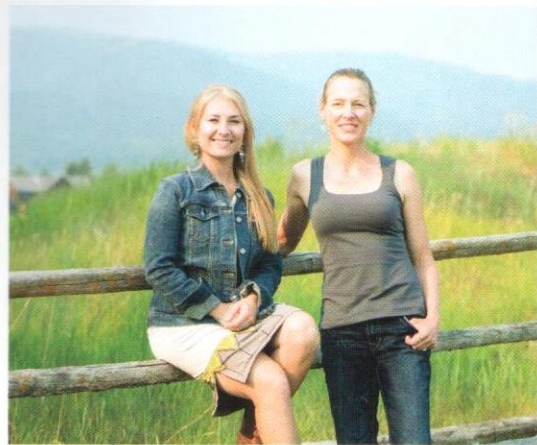
in Teton County, Wyoming, outside the national parks. A portion of those animals did not die on impact and could have been candidates for rehabilitation.

For Renee and Lindsay, a clear line exists between wildlife that are injured during the course of their natural lives and wildlife that become injured through an unfortunate interaction with humankind.

“It’s our moral obligation to intervene on behalf of wildlife, but we also believe in letting nature take its course,” Lindsay says. “If there’s a failed predation attempt, as an example, it’s going to be hard, but we wouldn’t intervene.”

Educating the public about when and how to intervene is a key component of the center’s mission. “It’s really important to leave those [naturally injured] critters on the landscape,” Renee says. “It maintains the natural cycle of death, predation, and scavenging.”

The moral obligation to undo some of the human-caused damage becomes even more crucial, Lindsay says, as the Greater Yellowstone area becomes inundated with more tourists, more residents, and more development. “I’ve noticed a huge increase in traffic and visitors, and [this means] you’re going



RENEE SEIDLER (LEFT) AND LINDSAY JONES, FOUNDERS OF TETON WILDLIFE REHABILITATION CENTER.

to have more wildlife-human interactions,” she says.

The idea of a wildlife rehabilitation center in the region has garnered support from agency representatives and wildlife advocates alike.

“If we can give wildlife a second chance to live in the wild, we should do it,” says Lisa Robertson, co-founder of Wyoming Untrapped, a nonprofit that advocates for the reform of trapping regulations. “I see injured animals every single day, a lot of them from trapping. Many are non-target, non-game animals that are tossed because they have ‘no value.’”

Lisa points to the success of the Teton Raptor Center as an example of a wildlife rehabilitation effort that has excelled at educating the public. “They’re hooked for life,” Lisa says, of people who volunteer for the center or participate in its education programs.

The biggest challenge Renee and Lindsay currently face is finding a piece of land on which to build a rehabilitation facility. When they do, the biologists’ vision can truly come to fruition. The idea is to take in roughly fifty animals per year.

“The goal is to release all of them,” Lindsay says. “If we can’t release [an animal], we probably won’t take it or we’ll find an alternative. We’re not building a sanctuary.”

Learn more about the Teton Wildlife Rehabilitation Center at tetonwildlife.org. 