Welcome to

INSTINCTS

MAY 2026 Vol 15:2

"The newsletter helping you follow your Wild Instincts."

WHISK

On March 4, the Wild Instincts Team suffered a profound loss when Whisk, our education barred owl suddenly and very unexpectedly passed away.

Whisk came to Wild Instincts after being dropped off after hours at the door of a vet clinic on May 28, 2015. No info, just a fluffy 5 to 6-week-old, barred owl in a box on a doorstep.

Admitted as a "fluffy grapefruit"

Upon examination, it was clear she would never be able to be released. She had fractures to her "fingers" on both wings; like if someone grabbed the leaves on the end of a tree branch, pulled and twisted. She would never have enough flight maneuverability to catch food on her own, even if she could develop some flight.

How did this happen? Did she fall from the nest and get lodged in the crook of the tree? Was it a congenital deformity? We had, and still have, no idea.

What we did know, is that we were looking for an owl to use in our education programs. Given her age and injuries, she would be a perfect candidate. We applied for and were granted the proper permits. The young owl captured the hearts of all volunteers and interns immediately. Because she was to become an education ambassador, she needed to be exposed to people, unlike any of our patients. This opportunity gave everyone a unique break from our normal routines.

Whisk overseeing intern charting.

She was basically raised in the kitchen, exposed to all the hustle and bustle of the heart of a busy rehab center. She made herself the Queen of the Kitchen. Her name even reflected this. She spent so much time there, when it came time to name her, we were thinking of kitchen items. The name Whisk fit, not only the kitchen she loved, but also the rictal bristles around her beak that act as whiskers.

Whisk supervising mopping duties.

She became one of the cornerstones of our education program. Because of her demeanor and early exposure to hustle and bustle, she took the people and unpredictability of presenting to the public all in stride.


Whisk at a large, chaotic education program.

It's likely that if you were a student or had one in the Rhinelander School District in the last 10 years, you met Whisk. She has been on hundreds of programs and met thousands of people. In fact, the week before her passing, she helped present five school programs.
A barred owl's life expectancy in the wild is 8-10 years. In captivity, they usually live much longer. It's unknown why she passed away or if it had to do with her unusual injuries.
She lived a life teaching & giving people an appreciation for our Wild Relatives and leaves behind a huge hole.
Our education program will look much different this year and we ask for grace & understanding for our staff & volunteers as we try to navigate this new path.
Whisk, Barred Owl
3/2015-3/4/2026

WPS FOUNDATION

Special thanks to the WPS Foundation for awarding us $5000 from their Safety Charity Challenge.
The monies were donated for us to use as needed, but it just so happened that we needed a major electrical upgrade to be able to run aquatic filters and heat lamps needed for expanding aquatic animal enclosures in response to other centers decreasing or even stopping their treatment of waterfowl.
New lines were trenched, new breakers installed, including a manual transfer switch that allows us to use one generator to power the buildings without running extension cords everywhere.
Ironically, there was a power outage while the electricians were here working so we got a live, hands-on tutorial of how the generator connection works from the expert installers!


Electricians hard at work.

New electric lines being installed

Another electric breaker box to service new enclosures.

IN HONOR OR MEMORY OF

~In Memory of Thomas Walter Peard
~In Memory of "Doc" Stimart, trusty steed & forever friend
~In Memory of "Bella" Kopp, happiest dog ever & loved by all the Dunroven Farm Family
~In Memory of Marcia Johnston
~In Memory of Wild Instincts Education Team Member "Whisk"
~In Memory of "Alca" Larson-Naniot
~In Memory of Skeeter Smith
~In Memory of "Norway"
~In Memory of Ginger Jach-Richards
~In Memory of Mary Spitz
~In Memory of TDI Therapy Dog "Scout" Kluetz
~In Memory of Sharon Markle
~In Memory of Carolyn Jacobs
~In Memory of Carol Malmgren
~In Memory of Cathy Bruso

New electrical box with multiple possibilities.

HPAI AGAIN

Our Spring Interns finished their orientation training, just one day before we admitted several red fox kits that would illustrate why train so intensively.

One of the subjects we go over in great detail is Zoonoses; those diseases which animals can transmit to people. SARS CoV2 (Covid), West Nile Virus, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (Bird Flu), and Rabies are just a few examples. We also go over the many parasites, both external and internal wild animals are host to. Disney movies always seem to overlook these very important things to know.

An unhealthy-looking red fox kit.

The risk of diseases and parasites is just one of the many reasons we ask you to call *immediately* if you find a wild animal you think may need help. We are aware of the potential risks and can advise you how to get the animal to the help it needs SAFELY, for you, your pets and the animals.

Many different diseases have some of the same symptoms. Head trauma, canine distemper, feline distemper, poisoning and rabies are a few things that can present in the same way, with many of the same symptoms. This is one of the things that makes wildlife rehab more challenging than domestic veterinary care. Wildlife doesn't come with owners that can provide a history of what may have happened and when.

How can you tell if animal is rabid? When many people hear the word rabies, they think of Old Yeller, vicious and foaming at the mouth. The truth is much more complicated. The answer is the ONLY way to know is to test brain tissue, which means the animal sacrifices its life.

If an animal is showing neurological issues and there was potential for human exposure, it becomes a public health issue. Rabies is spread through saliva and bodily fluids. If there's a chance someone may have had contact with either of those, the animal must be tested. Many people get upset at us for following the rules and putting people's health before animals', but public health takes precedent. Rabies is fatal in people. We abide by the decision of the Public Health department. There are those who say the potential victim should just get the vaccines instead of sacrificing the animal. Situations are rarely just black and white. Rabies viruses are prevalent in some species but not in others; there are also costs and side effects to consider.

The best way to help wild animals you think need help is to CALL US FIRST and follow our instructions. We can talk you through the individual situation. It may not need help at all. Or the help you think you need to give it, like feeding it something, will make the animal worse. That's the last thing you want to do with the animal you care enough about to go out of your way to help.

We recently admitted three fox kits from different people on different days from the same general vicinity. In each case, the finders thought the foxes were cold, shivering, or trying to cough when they were having seizures. Because well-intentioned people just thought they were cold and hungry, they fed them.

In reality, they weren't just cold or hungry but were exhibiting signs of a neurological disease.

Red fox kit with HPAI.

Our experience with different diseases made us suspect they could be infected with HPAI. Experience is used because in many cases, there isn't testing available to definitively diagnose and truthfully, in many cases, there just aren't resources even available.

In 2022, an outbreak of HPAI affected red fox kits for the first time in our experience. Approximately 39% of the red fox kits admitted that year, likely had HPAI. Because it was new, treatment was unknown. Despite all our best efforts, we could not keep any of those alive longer than 36 hours.

The admission of these three this year gave us a chance to try again. One passed away shortly after admission. Another died shortly after its admission. The last one, however, we treated for 72 hours with marked improvement. We are hopeful that we may be on the right path of treating HPAI in fox kits but were unable to pursue it in this case to see if the kit may have recovered without lasting side effects.

That's when it came to light the human exposure of people finding them and trying to help them. Because they both showed neurological signs, he to be euthanized for required rabies testing along with his deceased sibling.

Rabies tests result quickly came back negative. HPAI testing is not required and generally not even an option, but due to the amount of human exposure and some inter-agency cooperation, it was able to be accomplished in these special circumstances.

Several days later the HPAI testing results were available. Our suspicions were confirmed. They were positive.

County health departments called all who had exposure, including our staff and transport driver, with a list of questions and advice.

This is another unforeseen and unfortunate outcome of good intentions gone wrong. In general, unless you are a wildlife health expert, you likely don't know what you don't know. Or how much of it you don't know. We answer the phone 24/7. Please call us first and we'll help you help them. Then you don't have to worry about not knowing the right thing to do. We'll do it together.

GOOD BAD UGLY

Kaitlin Wikoff, Senior Advanced Rehabber

I was officially hired at Wild Instincts in 2019. I have been working here for 7 years, and while sometimes I can tell that it has been 7 years, most of the time I feel like I just started and am still learning everything. Rehabilitation is not the media-portrayed joyous carnival of cuddly animals who only come in for a few cute photos and then get released. You can't always have perfect, healthy animals or else you wouldn't need rehabilitators in the first place. Animals don't come in with complete medical histories and detailed accounts of what happened and how they're injured. There is no perfect formula of 'if this, do that'. There is researching natural history for specific species, looking up diet information, and learning from your mentors who have hopefully seen similar scenarios in their time in rehabilitation. There has to be a passion

for wildlife to help make this job possible for people, but you must have a thick skin because this job is not easy. Rehabilitators have to figure out not only what's wrong, but then we have to make the plan, cage and diet for the animal to try and fix the problem as best we can. We have good resources and plans for species that we commonly get in care, but there's always a new case that stumps us every year, or a new disease outbreak that makes us change our routines, or just an abundance of babies that makes us put temporary caging in places it usually isn't. But we make it work. I joined the board for the Wisconsin state group of rehabilitators a couple years ago to get to know more rehabilitators across the state, and I have seen even in my short time how fast the turnover can be. The emotional, mental, physical and psychological aspects of rehab are grueling.

"Burnout" is common in rehab.

This leads to an unfortunately high rate of 'burn out', or short careers for many people in wildlife rehabilitation. Even in my short time in rehabilitation, I can see the turnover. There are already people around the state who started around the same time as me that changed careers away from rehab for various reasons, and there are just not as many people jumping in to fill their positions. When new rehabilitators start, they need mentors to help them as they learn how to care for various species, but with a lack of seasoned veteran rehabbers, this can be difficult. If your mentor has only been working for 3 years, they probably know the basic care for the most common species in rehab, such as bunnies, squirrels, raccoons, songbirds, and ducklings, but they may not know how to handle eagles, swans, weasels, woodchucks, or otters because in their 3 years none of those species happened to walk in the door. One big trouble with rehab is you truly never know what you're going to get, and if you only see a weasel every 5 years or so, and your staff haven't been there that long, then they have to be able to turn to someone else in the area who may be more tenured. But those people are few in Wisconsin. Wild Instincts is lucky to have two very tenured rehabilitators in Mark and Sharon. This is why there are many people from the region, let alone across the US, that reach out to get their opinions and knowledge when working with special species, such as river otters or black bears or even more common species like porcupines and snowshoe hares.

There are markedly less rehabbers this year, and some facilities have had to adjust their animal capacity because of it. It makes sense that fewer staff cannot take care of the same high number of patients, but it is hard because that strains their neighboring rehabbers who may try to pick up the slack, but it truly sends ripples throughout the whole state when animals need help. Some people who find animals in need of help are actually willing to drive 3-4 hours one way just to get it to a rehabilitator who says 'yes I can help you'. Resources are thin and spread out geographically, which can make getting animals help when they need it difficult. Sometimes there isn't someone who can help in the same city, let alone the same county. It's hard for the animal, the person who found the animal, and for the

rehabilitators who get pleading phone calls for help but may not be able to help that specific animal. All rehabbers are trying their best to give the best care to the most animals they can, but when there are fewer rehabbers then unfortunately some animals have a hard time finding help. This lack of local resources results in untrained people trying to step in and help. Most of time the "well-meaning help" quickly makes the situation worse, and rehabbers have to devote more time and resources to undoing the harm the well-meaning help.

Rehabilitation is hard, no doubt. Setting aside the many legal requirements to become a rehabber, there are other considerations.

Passion seems obvious, but compassion and empathy are also huge components which can be a double-edged sword. You should have a thick-skin and a strong stomach sometimes, but that doesn't always protect your heart or your psyche.

Wildlife doesn't come with an instruction manual. Each case and situation is individual. The ugly can also be not knowing a perfect plan of action or using a sure-fire plan of action that doesn't work in this case then dealing with the outcome of your decision.

The bad can be gross wounds, people who don't listen to advice or instructions, or working from sunup to sundown and being woken up again in the middle of the night by an emergency phone call.

The good of rehab is helping the animals. It's teaching people that they can enjoy the wildlife in their yard without being afraid *of* it or afraid *for* it. And it's inspiring someone else's passion to maybe help wildlife too.

That's the good and the bad of rehab, and I truly love getting to help the animals every day. Baby season is in full swing, and we are grateful to be having interns lending a helping hand, but we hope to inspire many more people willing to help the wildlife in need in any way they can.

CULVER'S

Thanks to all who came out to Culver's in Rhinelander for an awesome Share Event. Between Culver's donation and the tips, we were able to raise $925!

It's absolutely wonderful to have a business like Culver's donate back to the community. We humbly thank you for helping us help them!

Sharon, Cheryl, Nancy, Dawn & Yvonne helped with the fundraiser.

Krystal of Culver's presented the check.

WORLD OF WOODCHUCKS

McKenna Brocco, Advanced Rehabber

With the arrival of Spring comes an influx of patients we haven't seen all winter. Most of these patients are baby animals, predominantly squirrels and bunnies. Generally, these babies are found displaced from their nests, but recently we admitted a litter of babies in a different way. An adult woodchuck was brought in at the end of March after being trapped by homeowners with the hope of relocating it. This is not what we do. But because it was still quite cold out, relocating the woodchuck was not possible. It's already stressful for an animal to be released into a territory it does not know. We try to make it as easy as possible by considering a variety of variables. A huge consideration is the weather, which wasn't very cooperative this spring. The woodchuck was in good health on admission so we made it comfortable until the weather improved and it could be released.

Unbeknownst to us, it wasn't alone. That became apparent when exactly two weeks later she gave birth to four baby "chucklets".

Wildlife does not always handle the stress of being in captivity very well and oftentimes will abandon their young if they happen to give birth in captivity. With that in mind, we tried to minimize the disturbance to the woodchuck as much as possible to give her and the babies the best chance to thrive in the situation they had found themselves in. Unfortunately, three weeks after giving birth the mother passed away unexpectedly. There are many reasons this might have happened. We will never know exactly why, but what we did know is that we were now responsible for her babies. The four babies she left behind are being given the best care possible and we are staying hopeful that they will continue to thrive.

Young woodchucks aka "chucklets".

Woodchucks are the largest member of the family Sciuridae, which also includes tree squirrels, flying squirrels, and ground squirrels. They can be found throughout the Northeastern part of the United States, but they prefer areas with loose sandy soil. Woodchucks are known by many names, including groundhogs and whistle pigs. These names are all descriptive in their own ways. The name woodchuck comes from the Cree word *Wuchak* which means digger. The name groundhog comes from the fact that they like to dig and burrow underground. The name whistle pig comes from the shrill whistle they may emit when they are startled. Woodchucks are also one of the only animals with their own holiday, Groundhog Day, which happens annually at the beginning of February. On this holiday, a woodchuck is awakened from its hibernation and, as legend goes, if the woodchuck sees its shadow it gets scared and returns to the burrow for six more weeks of hibernation, and thus six more weeks of winter. This prediction has been shown to be accurate less than forty percent of the time, so don't let a woodchuck choose your lottery numbers. Many people dislike having woodchucks on their property because they forage on crops in farmlands and eat fruits, vegetables, and flowers in gardens. Woodchucks dig large, intricate tunnels in yards and flower beds which many people view as an annoyance.

A woodchuck's underground burrow can be very impressive. A burrow can have upwards of ten entrances, and the tunnels can get up to forty-five feet in length. The intricate tunnel system includes a latrine area as well as a larger chamber that serves as a den, lined with grasses and dry leaves to help insulate. These underground dens are where woodchucks spend the winter hibernating and where they will have their babies come spring.

Woodchucks enter hibernation in October, during which their heart rate can slow to only fifteen beats per minute and their body temperature will decrease to less than forty degrees. They emerge from hibernation in March or April, depending on the weather, and immediately start looking for a mate. Woodchucks are generally solitary animals, but during breeding season males will mate with multiple females and even fight other males for a chance to mate with a female. After mating, the female woodchuck will go through a short gestation of only about a month. Woodchucks generally have two to six young who are born naked, blind, and defenseless. Though they start out helpless, young woodchucks grow quickly. They open their eyes at about 4 weeks old; they wean at around 6 weeks and start exploring outside the burrow, and at three months old they are completely independent from their mother. *The four woodchuck babies we have in care right now are not quite four weeks old and will be opening their eyes soon. They are doing well but still have a long way to go before they will be ready for release and their chance at life in the wild. *Since the original draft of this article, they have opened their eyes, moved to a larger enclosure and are thriving.

Woodchucks are growing fast and doing well.

RHINELANDER COMMUNITY FOUNDATION GRANT

Since our start in 2011, enclosure construction has been ongoing and evolving to meet the evolution of our admissions. Something we'd wanted was a better enclosure for upland bird species like ruffed grouse and wild turkey babies.

It remained just a wish because, until recently, with the numbers we admitted we could make do with what we had.

But because of an increasing need this wish moved up our priority list.

This spring we applied for a grant from the Rhinelander Community Foundation to help with some of the cost of getting this to fruition.

The weather and patient load cooperated, so we were able to get this enclosure completed the second week of May, just in time to be available for this Baby Season!

Base and uprights are laid out.

Trusses being erected.

Intern Karina & Heather assemble trusses.

Predator proofing being installed.

One layer of sidewall being installed.

More sidewall being installed.

Almost complete, needs doors & substrate.

Completed enclosure

Support for this project was provided by the Rhinelander Community Foundation.

BIG BROWN BAT RELEASE

Hannah Felsner, Advanced Rehabber

Spring is here, and while many new patients are being admitted, it's finally time for our bats to be released. This past season, we successfully overwintered eight Big Brown Bats. While many other bats were rehabilitated and released earlier in 2025, these individuals required extended care through the winter months, and some were admitted in early 2026. Big brown Bats typically hibernate from December through March in Wisconsin. Because these bats were admitted so late in the season, it was not safe to release them until the warmer weather returned.

There are eight species of bats found in Wisconsin. Several are currently classified as a threatened species in the state, Big Browns being one of them. Big Brown Bats have long, brown, often oily fur. They typically weigh between 11 and 23 grams, with a wingspan of 13 to 16 inches. Their range spans most of the United States, extending into northern Canada and down to southern Mexico. They occupy a wide variety of habitats but are most abundant in deciduous forests, though they have also adapted to living in urban environments often roosting in attics, sheds, buildings, and bridge structures. Like many bat species, they are insectivores, meaning their diet consists entirely of insects; primarily small beetles for the Big Browns. Because of this, they play an important role in the ecosystem by helping to control insect pest populations.

Bats can carry and transmit rabies, so all staff members are required to be up to date on pre-exposure rabies vaccinations. Special protocols and PPE are also required, not only to protect staff from rabies and SARS CoV2 potential, but to protect bats from White Nose Syndrome.

White-Nose Syndrome (WNS), a fungal disease prevalent in North America and responsible for significant declines in bat populations since its discovery during the

winter of 2006–2007. WNS is caused by a cold-loving fungus, which thrives in cold, humid, underground environments such as caves and mines where bats often hibernate. The fungus is transmitted directly between bats, through contact with contaminated surfaces, or indirectly through human activity when spores are carried on shoes, clothing, or equipment into previously uncontaminated areas. WNS affects bats in several ways. It damages their skin, particularly wing tissue, which is essential for processes like heat exchange, circulation, and water balance. It also causes infected bats to wake more frequently during hibernation, leading them to burn through their fat reserves and, in many cases, starve before spring. In the late stages of infection, the fungus can be visibly seen as white growth on a bat's muzzle and wings. In the early stages, however, it is not visible to the naked eye. Unfortunately, the only way to reliably confirm white-nose syndrome is through laboratory testing of diseased specimens. In addition to using proper PPE to prevent spread between patients, we also screen bats for infection using UV light. This has proven to be an effective tool, as the fungus fluoresces an orange-yellow color under UV light.

The door to the Bat Cave.

While in our care, we strive to mimic bats' natural behaviors by ensuring they can gain and maintain enough weight to successfully hibernate through the winter and be ready for release in the spring. We monitor each bat's weight and initially tweezer-feed mealworms until they begin eating on their own and reach a suitable weight to enter hibernation. Once they reach this stage, they are moved into our bat hibernation room, aka The Bat Cave, which is maintained at the appropriate temperature and humidity to support hibernation. We monitor room conditions daily but avoid disturbing the bats during this period.

Due to the especially cold spring this year, we did not begin waking the bats from the hibernation room until April. After the bats wake, we resume feeding until they are ready for release. When weather conditions are suitable, each bat is returned to their original territory to reduce stress and prevent the spread of any disease.

After months of care, monitoring, and careful handling, all eight bats were successfully released where they were recovered, which meant staff driving after hours to four different counties.

Releases like these are an important part of wildlife rehabilitation, giving animals a second chance while supporting local populations of a species facing ongoing threats.

Bat hanging from his perch ready to fly back to his wild home.

SPECIES ADMITTTED 2026

1/1/26 – 5/16/26

American Black Bear	2
American Goldfinch	2
American Robin	2
American Tree Sparrow	1
Bald Eagle	6
Barred Owl	7
Big Brown Bat	5
Black-capped Chickadee	3
Canada Goose	2
Chipping Sparrow	1
Common Garter Snake	1
Common Raven	2
Common Redpoll	1
Common Snapping Turtle	2
Dark-eyed Junco	1
Deer Mouse	2
Downy Woodpecker	1
Eastern Chipmunk	1
Eastern Cottontail	90
Eastern Fox Snake	1
Eastern Fox Squirrel	2
Eastern Gray Squirrel	50
Evening Grosbeak	1
Gray Wolf	1
Great Horned Owl	1
Hermit Thrush	1
Indigo Bunting	1
Mallard	13
Meadow Vole	1
Mourning Dove	5
Muskrat	1
North American Ruddy Duck	1
Northern Cardinal	1
Northern Raccoon	7
Northern Saw-whet Owl	1
Northern Short-tailed Shrew	1
Pileated Woodpecker	1
Pine Grosbeak	1
Purple Finch	2
Red Fox	7
Red Poll	1
Red Squirrel	7
Red-bellied Woodpecker	1
Red-winged Blackbird	1
Rock Dove	4
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	1
Ruffed Grouse	1
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
Snowy Owl	1
Southern Flying Squirrel	9
Virginia Opossum	5
Western Painted Turtle	4
White-tailed Deer	1
White-throated Sparrow	2
Wild Turkey	1
Woodchuck	5
Total	277

UPCOMING EVENTS

WILD ScaVenture 2026
Friday, July 24th- Sunday July 26th
Played with your smartphone from wherever you are!

Do you love wildlife?
Do you love puzzles?
Do you love trivia?
Do you love challenges?
Do you love winning prizes?

If you answered yes to even one of those questions, then Wild ScaVenture is for you!
Mark your calendars now!

Bake Sale
Saturday, August 8 8:00am-1:00pm
Hodag Farmers Market
Pioneer Park Rhinelander

5K 10K Walk Run
September TBD Rhinelander