

***Wild at heart***  
***Animal experts say residents shouldn't raise wildlife***

By Geneva White, Northwest Herald

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HARVARD—Deb Howden loved the baby raccoons so much, she bottle-fed them, gave them names, and began housebreaking them.

Then on Thursday, a conservation officer from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources showed up at her Harvard home and said she was breaking the law by keeping the raccoons, Ketchup and Riki, she had raised since June as pets. The officer took the raccoons from Howden, along with a blue jay she also kept.

"They're not wild raccoons," Howden said. "I feel like my babies were taken away, and I want them back."

With wildlife habitats surrounding suburban sprawl throughout McHenry County, some residents might be tempted to keep the wild animals they find or rescue. But IDNR officials insist that trying to domesticate wildlife is dangerous for both creature and caretaker. The practice also is a misdemeanor punishable by up to \$1,500 in fines and a potential jail sentence.

"Most wild animals don't make good pets," said Bob Bluett, an IDNR wildlife biologist.

"Wild animals have a lot of diseases that can be transferred to people or pets. Generally, wildlife have strict needs in terms of nutrition and care."

Bluett said raccoons can become extremely aggressive once mating season arrives in January and February.

"It's not unusual for them to get real restless and start tearing things up, or even getting to the point where they'll bite," Bluett said. "There aren't any rabies vaccinations approved for use with anything other than domestic animals."

If a person finds a wild animal, he or she should contact a local wildlife rehabilitator, who would prepare the animal to reenter the wild, Bluett said. Rehabilitators exist in McHenry County for almost every Illinois species, from foxes to pigeons. Wildlife rehabilitators are licensed through the state, and must be willing to give up the animals when they are ready to be released.

"There are rules and regulations and everybody has to follow those," said Monica Young, founder and president of the Wildlife in Need Foundation in Woodstock.

Young said she knows of one situation in which a raccoon was taken into a home and domesticated, then turned loose. The raccoon was killed by a man who thought something was wrong with the animal when it fearlessly approached his children.

"To keep them as a pet is not fair to the creature or to you," Young said. "You need someone who knows what they're doing and how to treat them."

Lynda Sugasa, director of the Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge in Marengo, said wild animals being kept as pets has become more prevalent in the United States, particularly because of the illegal pet trade.

"People are trying to get exotics and wild animals as pets," Sugasa said. "It's such a dire situation because when they decide they don't want them anymore, where can they go?"

Wild animals that are too domesticated to be released into the wild and cannot be placed anywhere else sometimes are euthanized, Sugasa said.