

## Growth driving up costs for wildlife center

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When it opened three years ago, the Folke Peterson Wildlife Center was just a well-outfitted building in a remote western pocket, the result of a dream to help sick, injured and orphaned native Florida wildlife. Today, it's a bustling rehab center that treats an average of three new animals a day.

But as wildlife habitat continues to give way to suburbia, staff members expect that number to rise. And with that increase will come a continual rise in the cost to rehabilitate the thousands of birds, mammals and reptiles that are brought into the center.



Thomas Cordy/The Post

**Vered Nograd gets ready to suture an incision on a brown pelican at the Folke Peterson Wildlife Center. Almost three-quarters of the nearly 6,000 animals the center has treated have been birds.**

The center was built off Acme Road near Southern Boulevard and State Road 7 with \$2 million donated by the late Folke Peterson, a dairy farmer from western Broward County. Trustees of Peterson's estate bought 30 acres previously owned by Bonnie Findlay, who was herself a backyard animal rehabber.

The center's \$500,000 annual operating budget comes from donations, some of which will be raised at its second annual Wild Again Dinner and Auction, scheduled for March 10 at the Sailfish Club in Palm Beach.

When it opened in February 2004, it had two patients: a great blue heron and a reddish egret. On a recent day, two birds were brought in before noon, and Wildlife Care Manager Vered Nograd had done surgery on one of them. At any given time, the center is caring for about 200 animals. During "baby season," that doubles, Nograd said.

The numbers prove that the center's trustees were right about there being a tremendous need for wildlife rehabilitation.

"We've treated 5,690 animals since we opened," said Executive Director Barbara Hiaasen. "Just in November alone, there was a 90 percent increase in admissions because we've had so many pelicans."

A plastic bucket on the counter in the center's lobby shows why. It's filled with fishing line and lures of all sizes that were extracted from the people-friendly birds.

"Sometimes they're hanging off them. Sometimes they're inside," Hiaasen said. "We try to educate these fishermen about what to do if they hook a pelican. But sometimes, there are abuse cases."

Almost three quarters of the animals the center has treated have been birds. Mammals comprised 25 percent, and 4 percent were reptiles.

Between April and November, nearly 80 percent of all the animals are babies, many of them songbirds that have been knocked out of a nest or attacked by a cat or dog. The rest of the year, the center gets mostly injured animals, many of them migrating birds that are down for the winter. Some injuries are so severe that even a member of a special species can't always be saved, Nograd said. State laws prohibit saving birds that must have more than half of a limb amputated, she said.

Like in any hospital, every case is different. But like in any hospital, the goal with Folke Peterson is getting its patients healed and back into their environment, Hiaasen said. There are a few "animal ambassadors" who are permanent residents, including Stinky the skunk, a gopher tortoise and some baby box turtles that make burrows in a display in the lobby.

One enclosure with a large pond in the middle is almost exclusively dedicated to pelicans, which last week numbered about 25.

In a huge flying cage, two horned owls stare down from perches at human intruders, and three red-tailed hawks test their wings.

Another enclosure designed for mammals houses Stinky, as well as a few opossums and some rabbits. Sometimes, the rabbits that get taken to Folke Peterson were pets whose owners no longer want them. That's not the clientele Folke Peterson was designed to help, but "if someone drops an animal off at our door, we can't turn it away," Hiaasen said. Those domesticated animals must be adopted because they can't be released into the wild, she said.

The center takes in animals from throughout Palm Beach County because it's the only place in the county dedicated primarily to rehabilitating wildlife, unlike Busch Wildlife Sanctuary, which is primarily a refuge.

It has gotten animals from as far away as LaBelle on the west side of Lake Okeechobee.

With the anticipated increase in patients, the center is looking for money, supplies and volunteers, Hiaasen said.

"We're relying on the goodness of the private sector," she said. "Our admissions are only going to increase because of the loss of habitat. It's happening all around us."

#### Folke Peterson Wildlife Center

What: A not-for-profit center that cares for sick, injured and orphaned native Florida wildlife.

Where: 10948 Acme Road

Information: (561)793-BIRD or online at [www.fpwildlife.org](http://www.fpwildlife.org)

Annual operating budget: \$500,000 (including \$52,000 for insurance, \$30,000 for utilities, \$45,000 for food, medical supplies)

Fund-raiser: Wild Again Dinner/Auction

When: March 10

Where: Sailfish Club, 1338 North Lake Way, Palm Beach

Time: 7 p.m. cocktails; 8 p.m. dinner

Cost:\$125 per personWish List

Cages, including pet carriers, aquariums and small wire cages.

Bedding, such as old towels, pillowcases, baby blankets and sheets.

Cleaning supplies, including dishwashing liquid, laundry detergent, scrub pads and brushes, plastic trash bags, mops, brooms.

Bowls, non-tipping metal, ceramic and plastic.

Medical supplies, including lactated ringer solution, cotton swabs, gauze, needles, syringes, butterfly catheters, digital gram scale, ophthalmoscope.

Office supplies,such as white and color copier paper, envelopes, stampsand a laptop computer.

Maintenance supplies, including pressure-treated wood, hoses and nozzles,native plants and hand and power tools.

Golf cart