

# JO-ANNE ROWLEY

## From Nurse to Wildlife Rehabilitator

INTERVIEWED BY E.M. FAY



Baby possum in pink jammies

Jo-Anne Rowley, licensed Wildlife Rehabilitator in Phoenicia, has worked to save the lives of a variety of animals over the years. Species include small mammals such as squirrels, rabbits, woodchucks, and porcupines, as well as songbirds, but she has a special fondness for opossums.

Opossums – or “possums,” as people shorten their proper name – have numerous interesting characteristics. For one thing, opossums are the only marsupial in the United States. Marsupials’ babies emerge at birth as small as bumblebees, crawl through their mother’s fur to her abdominal pouch, and there attach themselves to her nipples. They are nursed in the pouch for two cozy months, then climb

out and cling to her back as she walks, until they are fully grown. This is quite an impressive feat when you realize that a mother opossum can have a lot of babies!

The undaunted nature of these backpacking mommies is not lost on Rowley. “I love the way they carry their young,” she says.

Once, Rowley said, a friend of hers saw a possum walking down the street in Woodstock, and was afraid it had been hit by a car because it was staggering. It was a relief to find that actually, the gallant girl was walking like that because she had 12 babies on her back!

The first animal that came Rowley’s way after she was licensed was a full-grown male opossum. She had never seen one alive before, so she was a bit startled. Luckily, he was not badly injured, and even tried to chew his way through the cage. She took him to her mentor – a woman with years of experience – who showed Rowley how to treat him. “I fell in love with opossums,” Rowley said. “A mother shouldn’t have favorites, but I do. I am just captivated by their beauty.”

Sadly, we all too often see opossums when they are lying dead or injured by the road. Skunks, opossums, and other local species who come out at dusk and try to get home in the dim light of morning have an especially hard time of it.

Jo-Anne Rowley grew up in Forest Hills, Queens; she spent summers in the Catskills, and has an affinity for the area and its wildlife. She became a Registered Nurse, living in Boulder and Denver, Colorado for 25 years, but always felt drawn to the Catskills. After a long career in hospital nursing, she returned 10 years ago, settling in Phoenicia.

Noticing an announcement in the newspaper that the Department of Environmental Conservation was administering a Wildlife Rehabilitator’s license test, Rowley took it, passed, and got started on a new life.

“Like everything else, when you have a little book knowledge, theory does not always translate into practice,” Rowley confided. “I knew nothing, really, so I found a really good mentor and worked with her for a long while. Eventually, I let the apron strings go, and I’ve been independent for nine years now. But no matter how long you do this work, there is always someone who knows more than you do about every animal, every bird. I often call other rehabbers to get extra tips.”

Not everyone makes it, of course, and that’s always hard. But those who are gone are never forgotten, as Jo-Anne maintains a small graveyard in her back yard.

Opossums have a tough time surviving in a hard winter. They do not hibernate, so they must come out every night to forage. When it’s extra cold, food is hard to come by. They’re not really suited to typical northern winters, but because of global warming, they began slowly migrating



northwards. Now they are settled here, during a prolonged frigid period, they suffer.

Some unthinking people dismiss opossums as unimportant, even expendable, but actually they are very helpful to the eco-system. As omnivores, they consume a lot of smaller creatures that humans think of as pests, including bugs and small mice. If we would but appreciate and protect them, we wouldn't need to pay human exterminators to poison our environment.

#### How to Help

Rowley shared some ways to help preserve these inoffensive woodland neighbors. If you see an opossum in or on the side of the road, apparently having been struck by a car, do not just assume s/he is dead and nothing can be done. Making sure you are not putting yourself in danger, check the opossum for a pouch. If it is a female and has one, there may be live babies inside who could be saved. Rowley saved 33 baby opossums that way, two summers ago. Sometimes dogs attack opossums, so check for babies in those cases, too. Occasionally, the mother herself can be saved.

Rowley recommends that people keep gloves in their car – latex or dishwashing type, anything protective and flexible – and if the opossum is in the middle of a road lift it gently and move it to a safe spot on the side, then check the pouch for young. If you find any, call a local rehabber immediately. It is helpful to have a shoebox and a clean towel with you, too. It is most important to keep the animal warm and not give it any food or water until it is with a rehabber. Feeding a cold mammal can be a death sentence.

A vital part of the committed rehabilitator's "job" is to educate the public, which can mean saving more precious wild individuals in future. Rowley works with other rehabbers, teaching tips to the general public, and also to encourage new people to get into wildlife rehabilitation. They taught a class at SUNY Ulster last year and will have another one in the fall.

When asked what she would wish for if she had her druthers, Rowley said, "I wish people were more conscious of the pain and suffering that they cause to wildlife with their cars, lawnmowers, and pesticides. I wish for just a general increase in their consciousness about the lives of animals."

#### Tools of the Trade

Caring for injured wildlife requires more than compassion, know-how, and elbow grease. A variety of supplies and food items are needed, and all species-specific. Rowley is very grateful for donations from kind people. "I find that people are generous, whether they bring paper towels, or disinfectant wipes, or monetary help, or someone will say, 'Keep the animal carrier.' One lady brought an injured bunny to me and also some lovely fresh vegetables from her garden."

#### Finding a Release Site

Finding appropriate release places once an animal has recovered is a problem. "It's really difficult to find safe places to release small mammals," Rowley said. Ideally, they would be away from any roads, and preferably with a stream or other water source, plenty of cover, and sufficient food sources.

Whatever the future brings, Rowley is certain she will continue to love opossums. In fact, she had a baby opossum in her shirt pocket during our interview.

If you have an opossum or other wildlife rehab question, contact Jo-Anne Rowley at [joannerowley@earthlink.net](mailto:joannerowley@earthlink.net)

