

Minnesota wildlife hospital, one of the world's busiest, plans expansion

The Wildlife Rehabilitation Center has purchased 22 acres in Grant, Minn., for a new \$14 million campus.
By Star Tribune

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One of the world's busiest wildlife hospitals is located in a cramped building in a Roseville park, taking in nearly 20,000 patients a year from sleepy-eyed cottontails to majestic trumpeter swans.

After 20 years, it's run out of space.

The nonprofit Wildlife Rehabilitation Center has purchased 22 acres in the Washington County city of Grant, with ambitious blueprints to spread its wings and build an environmentally friendly, \$14 million campus focused on rehabilitation and orphaned wild animals, including raising 2,000 ducklings each spring.

"We always thought we needed a rehabilitation campus for our injured and orphaned young patients in the summertime," said Executive Director Phil Jenni. "There is the emergency veterinary clinic, but most of our business, frankly, is the summer nursery business: baby bunnies, baby squirrels, baby ducklings. All of those things that aren't necessarily injured, but they need help."

Wildlife Rehabilitation Center's new campus

The nonprofit wildlife emergency hospital, headquartered in Roseville, is expanding to a 22-acre campus in nearby Grant, in Washington County.



Yuqing Liu, Star Tribune • Source: Wildlife Rehabilitation Center

The nonprofit will continue to operate its Roseville veterinary hospital, where all patients will be initially admitted and evaluated. Renee Schott, a veterinarian and the center's wildlife director, said the additional space is desperately needed and will raise the standard of care for all patients. Currently, staff members are using every "nook and cranny" of the Roseville building and have space off-site for ducklings, she said.

"Having a new campus will help our healthy young patients grow up in a more wild environment. Right now, we are smack in the middle of the city," Schott said. "It will also give them the space they need to grow and get away from our sick and ill patients."

Founded in 1979 as a student club at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, the center opened its Roseville location in 2003. The organization now has a \$2.3 million annual budget and admits as many as 250 animals a day during busy months.

Eight veterinarians, more than 30 other staff members, 70 student interns and 600 volunteers provide care, which includes X-raying and setting broken bones, administering medications, testing for lead poisoning and other toxins and nurturing youngsters. Animals are released back into the wild near where they were first found.

The center has treated 200 species of animals, according to its records. While most are common to Minnesota and are not in peril, Jenni said the organization's mission is fueled by a love of nature and a deep sense of compassion.

"People appreciate natural resources here and they appreciate wild animals," he said. "It's a way for them to act on values. It's almost a secular religion. Who do we want to be as people and what kind of world do we want our kids to live in?"

Members of the public, as well as animal control officers, can drop off injured and orphaned animals free of charge. Families regularly come in together to drop off animals, Jenni said.



"The parents often say to us, 'Thank you so much for having this place where I can model compassion and kindness to my kids,' " he said.

Jenni, 68, will step down as executive director at the end of the year after 20 years on the job, then serve as project manager for the Grant facility before retiring. The role will include fundraising and planning, with the goal of completing the campus in 2024.

Being good environmental stewards is a top priority, so the nonprofit is installing a state-of-the-art closed water filtration system, which will capture rainwater to fill 56 in-ground ponds needed to raise 2,000 ducklings each spring. That will take 165,000 gallons of water.

The system will allow water to be filtered and reused, keeping patients healthy and protecting natural resources.

"The highest level of design is for the ducklings," Jenni said. "That water has to be cleaned every day."

The facility will also have air filtration systems and geothermal heating and cooling technology. There are already outdoor cages in place for raccoons, squirrels and birds, positioned near the center of the property and out of sight of neighbors and passersby. The campus will not be open to the public.

"We want to be a positive part of the community," Schott said. "We want to be flying under the radar as much as possible."

The city of Grant approved a conditional use permit for the campus in 2020, despite some hand-wringing from neighbors about the possibility of increased traffic and other changes to the rural community.

"The city has received no complaints," said Mayor Jeff Huber. "I think they've been a good neighbor."

The project also has approval from the Rice Creek Watershed District, Jenni said.

The nonprofit has already invested \$2.5 million in the property, he said. The next challenge is completing fundraising — a goal the organization is aiming to reach by spring of 2024, having secured a major donor.

With patient admissions up more than 34% during the COVID-19 pandemic, they're hopeful the compassion for their work will continue to grow.

"We want to get everyone excited about this," Jenni said.

