

No two days are alike

From beavers to birds to lizards, PAWS wildlife veterinary technician never knows what to expect

By David Pan

Wildlife veterinary technician Veronica Gordon has no idea what the day will bring when she steps into PAWS Wildlife Center for one of her four 10-hour shifts.



Veronica Gordon

One day, Gordon might help treat an injured

beaver involved in a fight with another beaver. The next day, she and a veterinarian might try to figure out if an eagle recovering from a fracture needs physical therapy.

Later in the week, Gordon might work on a barred owl or peregrine falcon with serious wounds after they've scuffled with other birds. She sometimes is surprised by the unexpected, such as the arrival of a northern alligator lizard with a traumatic tail amputation.

All of the above and more can take place on any given day – and

A Day in the Life

Veterinary technician Veronica Gordon administers anesthesia to a black bear cub.

All photos in this article courtesy of PAWS

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actually did during a weekday shift this spring.

You can count on it: No two days are alike at the PAWS Wildlife Center in Lynnwood.

“That’s what I like about it,” said Gordon, who moved from Massachusetts two and a half years ago to join the center’s veterinary team. “I think the variety is something that really draws all of us doing this work.”

The PAWS Wildlife Center includes an emergency hospital and specialized recovery facilities designed to rehabilitate sick, injured, and orphaned wildlife, restore them to full health, and return them to their natural habitats.

More than 260 species of mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles are treated at the center. The majority are birds and mammals. Amphibians and reptiles aren’t as common in Washington.

“We don’t see those as much,” said Gordon. “That being said, in the past week, we’ve gotten a frog and that alligator lizard.”

A SECOND SET OF HANDS

A wildlife veterinary technician’s duties are as varied as the species of animals treated at the Wildlife Center.

Gordon administers medication, runs diagnostic



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tests like CT scans or radiographs, does lab work, puts wildlife under anesthesia, consults with veterinarians, and carries out treatment plans.

“We wear a lot of different hats,” she said. “But at the end of the day, we are a second set of hands for veterinarians we work with. We’re another set of eyes and ears. If this was like a general practice for dogs and cats, we would be the interface between the patient and the client for the veterinarian.”

Gordon earned her pre-veterinary degree at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She worked at the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) Angell Animal Medical Center, a large emergency specialty hospital. She focused on exotic animals for several years.

She is licensed both in Massachusetts and Washington. The veterinary field is similar to the human medical field in that to be certified in a specialty, people have to do internships, publish papers, and complete a residency before taking specific boards.

“For wildlife that is still something that’s developing, and so my coworker Ian and I are licensed by the state,” said Gordon. “But we don’t have the specialty boards. It’s something that we are on a committee to develop.”



“You lose some of that personable and connection aspect,” Gordon said of wildlife. “With dogs and cats, you can pet them. You can talk to them. You can kind of build a rapport with them. Whereas all of our patients here are, rightfully as they should be and as we want, they don’t want anything to do with us. We don’t get that pet interaction that you do in the other field. And so I think it really comes down to caring about the environment, being really invested in the species.”

Each animal entering the Wildlife Center is unique, and that means Gordon and the medical team have to conduct research. It’s not like Gordon has a manual she can turn to.

“We’re trying things out and seeing if it works for the patient as opposed to having a lot of known information.”

MAKING THE ROUNDS

An admissions specialist is the first contact when a member of the public calls about an injured wild animal. The specialist determines whether a wild animal needs to come into the center and advises people on how they can safely get the animal into a container and transport it to the center with the least amount of stress possible.

One of the center’s four rehabilitators performs an initial exam, and based on protocols established by the veterinarian, the animal either sees a veterinarian or is euthanized. Those animals admitted are given about a day to stabilize.

“That’s when the veterinary team comes in,” said Gordon. “I evaluate all the patient records in the morning.”

The Wildlife Center has rounds every day, similar to medical rounds at hospitals.

“We discuss all of the patients that are under veterinary care with the other members of our hospital. This is where we bring up concerns. We talk about the logistics of care because not every wild animal loves being here, and sometimes we have to work together to figure out how we can minimize their stress. Each case is really unique. Then from there, we plan our day around the new patients, rechecks, and planned surgical procedures.”

On this particular day, Gordon and a veterinarian checked on the status of an eagle healing from a fracture. Gordon also attended to a great horned owl recovering from a fractured radius. Physical therapy was scheduled the next day.



PAWS animal care specialists inspect the beak and palate of an injured bald eagle.

The 30-year-old Seattle resident decided to pursue a career in the wildlife veterinary field in college. An internship with the Audubon Society left quite an impression. The organization operated a wildlife sanctuary where it hosted educational presentations with raptors.

“That was my first exposure to wildlife. Before that, I was that little girl picking up toads in the yard and trying to show them to other people, and other people were saying ‘no.’”

Many who enter the veterinary tech field are drawn by the prospect of working with animals, said Gordon. But those who work with wildlife often have different motivations.



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A great horned owl gets an inspection of its wing.



"We put pins in his bones to stabilize it," said

Gordon. "We have the wing immobilized just like we would immobilize a human. We'll do anything from laceration repairs to full-on orthopedic surgeries."

Animals are usually anesthetized during physical therapy to reduce their stress, especially those in severe pain.

"We can take that bandaging off and then we can stretch the muscles and get them to remember the full extension that they should have with a wing and just to help with the ease of pain," said Gordon of the treatment for a great horned owl.

"We're making sure that all the important components to flight are still available to that patient, and then when they are ready to have the hardware out and start to fly on their own, it makes it arguably an easier time for them to do so."

PHYSICAL WORK

The work of a wildlife veterinary technician can be very physical. Example: Gordon had to restrain a beaver being treated. She chemically sedated the beaver so it could be put under general anesthesia.

"He doesn't want us to touch him, and he's not going to let it happen, so we need to sedate him," said Gordon. "We had to carry him in. We had to position him for X-rays."



An injured beaver is treated and about to be placed in an incubator.

The beaver's injuries, likely inflicted by another beaver during a territorial fight, were too severe, and it was euthanized. Many of the animals treated at the center have infected wounds or wounds left untreated for an extended period of time.

"For some of them, the wounds are beyond repair

for us, and this was the case for the guy that we were just working on,” said Gordon. “He had some really advanced stage necrosis of tissue (blood flow cut off to bones), and these super-deep bite wounds that we’re assuming came from another beaver.”

Gordon and the veterinary medical team face death on a regular basis.

“All of us here in this field are super compassionate and empathic people,” she said. “Each life has significant value to us – anything from a mouse to a bear. It matters. We see its value. We do our best. It’s definitely a huge drain. For a lot of us in the veterinary field, we put our hearts into it.”



A blue heron is intubated for surgery.

As difficult as euthanasia is, Gordon and her colleagues recognize its need and value.

“It eases the suffering and pain and gives these animals that easy way out,” said Gordon. “It ends up being kind of an easier pill to swallow, because when you see these animals suffering it’s like we can give them that option. It helps us, too.”

A busy day got even busier as Gordon performed wound care on the right pectoral of a barred owl. Gordon has been tending to the wound for about a week. She also followed up with a peregrine falcon the center received from the Urban Raptor Conservatory in Seattle.

The conservatory monitors and bands birds. This particular peregrine falcon was 19 years old and was involved in a fight with another falcon or bird.

“He’s got lots of little punctures and a lot of bruising, and some people saw him midair entangled with another bird, and then he fell to the ground,” said Gordon. “He’s got a clavicle fracture that we’re dealing with right now. And then he’s got a skull wound, and we’re trying to figure out how much bearing that’s having on his neurological status.”

A less traumatic case involved a northern alligator lizard that found its way to the center. It’s the first of its type Gordon has seen at PAWS. Many lizards and



reptiles will amputate their own tail if a predator grabs them.

“We’re just giving him supportive care, and he should heal very readily on his own with some safe space.”

FULL EVALUATION

The medical team gives animals a full evaluation during the initial exam. The team checks on motor functions, how the brain is functioning, and how the limbs are being used. After the initial exam, animals usually are put under anesthesia for their specific treatment. To wild animals, people are scary and their presence causes stress, said Gordon.

Anesthesia is a complicated subject. It’s not like spays and neuters for dogs and cats where the majority of animals are healthy, said Gordon. Wildlife being treated at PAWS are either sick or injured.

“Their stability under anesthesia really varies. It tends to be quite a variety. One patient could be really critical. The next could be great. It just depends on the day.”



A technician examines an injured harbor seal pup.

Gordon said she spends about 70% of her time working directly with patients and 30% of her time on administrative tasks.

THE MOST MEMORABLE PATIENTS

Gordon will never forget her first summer in Washington. In 2021, four burned bear cubs res-



A black bear cub is released into the wild by the PAWS Wildlife Center.

cued from wildfires in central and eastern Washington arrived for treatment at the Wildlife Center.

Three of the four cubs survived and were released back into the wild. The fourth was not able to recover from severe burns.

“It was sad seeing those guys in so much pain,” said Gordon. The bears had to recover not only from their burns but also from other traumatic injuries, including smoke inhalation. The bears’ bodies were trying to deal with all the stress after their lives were thrown out of whack due to the wildfire. Day by day, week by week, the bears regained their strength.

“It was a lot of work. We were sedating those bears every other day for a few weeks, and there were three of them. We did a heck of a lot of work. They did great, and we felt really proud of them. They did a lot of hard work.”

The life of a wildlife veterinary technician, especially during the peak season from spring to mid-fall, can be

physically draining. It can be incredibly rewarding.

The highs of helping rehabilitate a bird, a mouse, a lizard, or a beaver (while one beaver had to be euthanized, Gordon noted that another had recovered from its injuries and was released earlier in the week) back to health seem to outweigh the inevitable disappointments.

“It’s amazing to know that you’ve made a difference and that animal can get back out into the wild and live its natural life and contribute to breeding or maintaining the ecosystem,” said Gordon. “Especially when it’s something intensive, you have a lot of investment in it. It’s like those DIY house shows where you see a really ugly house at the beginning. You get to see the beautiful one at the end. That’s kind of wildlife rehab.”

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A rehabilitated seagull is released.

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A bald eagle prepares to fly off into its natural habitat after being rehabilitated by the PAWS Wildlife Center.



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