

On the Positive Side

Easter pets create problems the day after

By Jo Ruprecht, Ph.D. For the Sun-News

Posted: 04/16/2011 09:49:51 PM MDT

Many of you are counting down toward Easter Sunday. My countdown begins just afterward. I'm counting the days until those cute spring chicks, bunnies and ducklings become big enough that someone realizes they can't stay in the bathtub or live in a box anymore. I'm one of the people who retrieve these animals from their next adventure - release in a neighborhood, on a golf course or at a local pond. Any Easter creature is a domestic animal and doesn't belong in a wild place. A stuffed toy would be a much kinder gift all the way around.

I've worked through Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue for 15 years assisting with ducks and domestic birds. I've come to dread Easter because of the predictable drop-offs that begin within days. In the past two years I've seen an increase in the number of birds left at NMSU's Alumni Pond and at the city's Young Park. Perhaps the saddest times have been when a pair of ducks or geese has been dropped off and one is killed, leaving the other to fend for itself alone in a strange place.

One of the better outcomes I've seen involves a small duck now named Kooshi. Last May I was checking on the resident ducks at Alumni Pond when I spotted a bird I didn't recognize. She was sitting by herself looking lost, and when I approached her she didn't fly or skim toward the water. Instead, she led me on a walk toward a building where I was able to corner her and pick her up. When I had her in hand it became obvious why she hadn't gotten off the ground - someone had "clipped her wings."

You know that phrase; it usually means trimming a bird's long flight feathers. But in Kooshi's case, someone had actually amputated the outer section of each wing, comparable to removing a human's arms from the elbows down. Once the wounds had healed, she was left at the pond as if she could manage living there with much bigger able-bodied birds and predators. Because I saw her on her first day and because she trusted me to pick her up, she now has a safe home with several other birds who are different. More on that in another story.

The main message is: don't leave domestic animals in wild places. The NMSU pond looks like a peaceful place for your Easter friend when you first see it. But the truth is that most birds dropped off alone there do not survive. Ducks are highly social and seldom take in a single newcomer, especially during mating season (spring and summer). Even birds dropped off in twos have difficulty protecting each other in an unfamiliar place. There are predators afoot and misadventures aplenty. There are far too many stray fishhooks and lots of dropped wads of nylon line that act as snares. And this year we have already had numerous coyote strikes.

That's the clincher this year, coyotes on campus, coyotes all over the valley. This year's cold snap and weather swings have contributed to a shortage of food for an abundance of coyotes. The coyotes are starving, and they are doing whatever they can to survive. So far they have killed at least a dozen ducks at the NMSU pond, and the ducks they have taken were residents who knew the pond, had a social group to protect them and had a much better chance than your Easter friend will have.

So, if you are faced with finding a new home for a duck, goose or bunny, don't look to Alumni Pond or some other wild place. The Animal Services Center people work to find homes for these creatures as well as for dogs and cats. Call them at (575) 382-0018. Check the ACTion Program web page for "Animals in Need" (www.actionprogramsforanimals.org/animals_in_need) or call them at (575) 644-0505 for help. Rather than risking death in a wild place, put in the time to find your friend a new life in a new home.

Jo Ruprecht, Ph. D., is trained in human psychology and animal ecology. She can be contacted at ruprecht@nmsu.edu.