

An Interconnected Existence: Humans and the Wild

A young girl walks home from school alone. She wanders down the side-walks of Torrance, California, arriving at her house. She cracks open the door. It's quiet. Her parents are away, working as usual. The girl moves to the television, switches it on and sits down. The screen lights up with animals--wolves, rabbits, bears. For a moment she has forgotten her loneliness. As she watches the animals, the young girl vows--someday she'll protect these very beings that loved her unconditionally when it seemed that no one else would.

"It's because of a little girl who watched too much Disney that this place exists," says, Diane Dragotto Williams as she stands in the lobby of Wildhaven Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary. In front of her, a semi-circle of visitors has gathered, equipped with sunglasses, water bottles and hats. Sunlight glistens through the door, backlighting Diane, tears in her eyes, as she finishes telling the story of the little girl. She smiles thanking the guests for coming to Wildhaven and wishing them a good time on their tour.

Murmurs fall through over the group.

"Was she the girl in the story?" one man asks a friend. The friend nods.

Following Diane through the door, the group steps onto a neatly groomed path. They move to the first pen. A bobcat from inside jaunts out of its hiding place to greet the visitors...but more importantly to feast upon its next meal. It stares, intensely fixated on the slabs of raw chicken Diane holds.

"His name is Lexus because he's fast, he's expensive and he's beautiful," she says.

Lexus eats 12 to 16 times per day. The pointy tufts on his ears make Lexus very attuned to electrical signals in his environment. With them, he is able to sense when a thunderstorm may be approaching.



Bayley Black Bear enjoying her fruit salad getting ready for hibernation.

"I had to feed him on a bottle. So he thinks I'm his foster mother." Now Lexus is sixteen years old.

While the rescued animals are in wired enclosures, it feels quite different than a zoo. Diane instructs the group to say "thank you" to Lexus. And they continue along the path, through the village of cages, passing Phantom the silver fox. The slope descends slightly.

"Dad you might want to hang out towards the back," Wildhaven guide, Scott Wolf, instructs a father holding a baby. "Once you find a seat, please remain seated," he continues. People take their seats on bales of straw waiting for a glimpse of the next animal.

What do you get when a Snickers meets an orange? HINT: It's not a fruit-flavored chocolate bar.

Through the wire, a brown-coated bear pushes her muzzle into an unpeeled orange, pinching it between his nose and the tree stump he stood upon. Juice gushing out, he happily lapped up the fruit inside. He had already finished a balancing act of eating a watermelon while standing atop the narrow edge of a large tub.

Another Wildhaven host, Roger Williams (no relation to the actor), begins narrating.

"Snickers was raised by a single mom, having trouble making

ends meet. So she turned to a life of crime to support her children. She was breaking and entering to get food for the kids,” Roger said. The mother was shot and killed leaving Snickers orphaned. Wildhaven adopted the cub and has since raised it.

Female black bears can get as big as 500 pounds. But despite their weight, black bears like Snickers can run over 30 mph.

Acorns crunched beneath the shoes of the group, as they moved to a larger pen situated on a slope. Diane appeared inside the pen. She had seated herself on a rock near a coyote named Wiley.

“He’s known Diane ever since he was a little puppy,” Roger said.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL CAROFF

Faline Mule Deer at attention listening to the falling of acorns

gained his name from a fight. One day, a lady crossed Stubby’s path--and she was quite the looker. The problem for Stubby was that he wasn’t the only raccoon in the forest looking for a hot date. 200 feet in the air, Stubby and another raccoon began tussling. Young Stubby was at the losing end.

“Down went stubby and off went his tail,” Scott Wolf said.

Raccoons have very dexterous hands.

“Once they learn a task like opening a garage door, they actually remember that task for three years,” Diane said.

Stubby showed off his dexterity as he ate out of a jar.

The tour continued stopping by a Phantom, deer and another bear.

“I like the atmosphere,” said visitor, Svetlana Carrillo, after the tour had completed. “The guides provided a lot of information and I loved the animals.”

Wildhaven Ranch is a wildlife sanctuary, education and visitation center for endangered and indigenous wild animals. It is operated by the San Bernardino Mountains Wildlife Society, a 501(c)(3) non profit organization. Weather permitting, The Ranch is open to the public year round on Saturdays for Wings ‘N’ Things and Paws N’ Claws programs and Fridays for Bear Watch.

To schedule an educational tour please call (909) 337-1391 or visit Wildhaven-Ranch.org. All tours must be reserved in advance; no walk-ins accepted.

— By Zev Blumenfeld



PHOTO BY DIANE DRAGOTTO

Lexus Bobcat cautiously checking out the guests on Tour.

Diane found Wiley deep inside a coyote den. It was thought that the pack had been stricken with a highly contagious and potentially deadly gastrointestinal illness, parvo, or distemper. In the wild, they will eat almost anything of nutritional value. If food is scarce, they will even eat charcoal for up three to four weeks,



PHOTO BY DAWN SELLECK

Waapake Blind Raccoon playing hide and seek in his tube