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ORANGE COUNTY

With Lease Expiring, Animal Welfare Group Seeks a Home

■The Pacific Wildlife Project, which treats hurt or sick mammals and birds, loses its space at the Irvine shelter this month.

By Arlene Martínez, Times Staff Writer

It's 11 a.m., and housekeeping calls. Maggie's place is replenished with fresh food and water, and the floors are swept clean.

Within five minutes, however, Maggie has redecorated. Comfortable now with kibble strewn across the floor and her food dish lying upside down in a tub of water, the raccoon hunts for treasures under the plastic mats lining her cage.

Maggie, who is blind in one eye, is a permanent resident of the Pacific Wildlife Project in Irvine. She and dozens of mammals and birds will have to move at the end of this month when the clinic's lease expires. The nonprofit center, which relies on donations from individuals, foundations and corporations, has not yet found a new home.

"We've been told it's a final decision," Executive Director Linda McLeod said of the move. If a new facility is not found, she said, "the program would be severely curtailed."

For eight years, the Pacific Wildlife Project has leased a building that is part of the Irvine Animal Care Center. The city plans to expand its shelter, which houses cats and dogs primarily.

"We have a responsibility to take care of the animals in Irvine," said John McAllister, deputy director of community services for Irvine. "Right now we're just getting pushed up against a wall with our own population."

The Pacific Wildlife Project was formed in 1986 after McLeod and her then-husband, veterinarian Richard Evans, realized there were few places that could care for injured and orphaned wild animals.

McLeod, who is licensed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the

California Department of Fish and Game, remembers as a child watching her mother care for hurt birds. She and Evans initially cared for the animals out of their Laguna Niguel home, but space soon became tight.

Most of the animals that receive treatment at Pacific Wildlife are nursed back to health and released. Some, like Maggie, stay on because of severe injuries or illness. None are turned away.

The majority of the animals — including pelicans, pigeons, ducks, crows, skunks, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits and sparrows — are found in Orange and Los Angeles counties, with a few from Riverside County. People either take the injured animals to Pacific Wildlife or group personnel pick them up.

No other shelter in Orange County services the same wide range of species, advocates say.

Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center of Orange County, for example, does not treat crows or pigeons, and the Orange County Bird of Prey Center cares only for raptors, such as owls, falcons and eagles.

As many as 2,000 animals pass through Pacific Wildlife annually, McLeod estimates.

"We treat all of our patients as individuals and give each the best care that we can," said volunteer coordinator Linda Winkle.

"The will to live in these animals is so strong," she said.

There's no doubt that the caregivers treat a menagerie. One recent arrival was a baby sparrow with a bloodied wing — which was stitched closed by McLeod. The bird, found wandering through an apartment complex, eats every half-hour from a dropper filled with a high-protein insect-flavored formula.

Nearby, three fuzzy ducks peeped in their cages. One, separated because of an eye infection, called to the two in the neighboring cage. Because spring means animal births, ducks were plentiful last week at the clinic — at least 50 of varying ages. Most are orphans.

Several endangered California brown pelicans, with conditions or injuries ranging from starvation to being snared with fishing hooks, greedily gulped down their daily ration of 25 fish.

Helping care for them all were seven blind or visually impaired teenagers from the Orange County chapter of the Braille Institute; they have spent their Saturdays cleaning and feeding the animals since last fall.

Each year the students raise money to donate to a special project. This year, half the proceeds from their Saturday pancake breakfast — 8 to 10 a.m. at the Braille Institute's center in Anaheim — will go to Pacific Wildlife.

"They don't understand why it should close because it does an important thing," said John Zamora, coordinator of youth and career services for the Braille Institute. "They're sad and they think it's wrong."

McAllister said the city would work with agencies and groups to ensure that no animal in need is turned away.

McLeod plans to continue her work, even if it's from her garage or backyard. And she won't be alone. Satellite locations run by people whose homes are licensed to care for the animals will still take new patients.

"The demands of the project are unrelenting," McLeod wrote in a recent fundraising letter.

"But I feel I am blessed because, even after 25 years, the sight of a bird flying free after a long recovery still takes my breath away."