

# C.R.O.W.: Healing and Teaching



Clockwise from top right: Marianna Popiel of Massachusetts, Mikki Talianko of Alabama, Lara Katarina Hamann of Germany, and Kate Purple of Tennessee.

by Libby Boren McMillan

**S**outhwest Sanibel Island's C.R.O.W. facility (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) is one of only a handful of stand-alone wildlife hospitals in the entire United States. With a staff dedicated to healing, it provides medical care to 3,400 "patients" a year.

But the C.R.O.W. facility also serves a second critical but lesser known purpose as a teaching hospital.

During their careers, veterinarians are often faced with wildlife situations as pet owners and animal lovers try to save injured animals. C.R.O.W. helps inspire vet and pre-vet students and teach them about wildlife injuries and care.

C.R.O.W. offers three programs that provide hands-on learning under the direction of Drs. P.J. Deitschel and Amber McNamara.

## INTERNS

Interns come to the facility for a full year. They are usually new graduates who are licensed as veterinarians and who have an interest in wildlife medicine. C.R.O.W. provides them on-site housing and salary for the year. Nature provides the 160 species of animals that are admitted and treated using western and eastern healing methods including surgery, acupuncture, herbal supplements, proper nutrition, and physical therapy.

In committing to assist C.R.O.W.

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

veterinarians for a year, interns are “pretty sure they want to practice wildlife medicine,” says Anita Pinder, community outreach coordinator. “They usually go on to a more permanent position in wildlife medicine, or perhaps to care for exotics, like zoo animals.” Two former C.R.O.W. interns were so infused with a passion for wildlife that after completing their yearlong commitment on Sanibel, they opted to earn a second Ph.D., in wildlife epidemiology.

**FELLOWSHIPS**

C.R.O.W. also makes housing and stipends available to candidates selected for Fellowships. “Fellows are typically undergrads,” says Pinder, “or students who have graduated and are waiting to get into veterinarian school, or who have not decided for sure what they want to do, either career-wise or school-wise.”

Fellowships last six months and allow



wildlife enthusiasts the chance to explore their options, with a close-up look at the realities of wildlife rehabilitation. Pinder estimates that C.R.O.W. Fellows have a very high “conversion rate,” with many opting for vet school or higher education after they have completed their term on the island.

Fellows supervise the daily outdoor

activities at the clinic. This includes supervision and care of the caged patients, dietary concerns and cage cleanings, plus overseeing all the volunteers and externs. “They are responsible directly to the vets for reporting any patient care issues,” explains Pinder. “They work with babies being weaned and raised, and also with patients that are sick or injured.” Fellows initially assess, and report to the vets, each patient’s potential for release. The decision to release a rehabilitated animal is often based on a Fellow’s input.

In April 2006, Johanna Neil was finishing her third stint as a C.R.O.W. Fellow. “I’ve learned so much,” she enthuses. “I’m still learning, every day, even now, after being here a year.”

After graduating from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, Neil was fairly certain she wanted to become a veterinarian. But before coming to C.R.O.W., she had no experience with

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wildlife. Her one zoology class had not been wildlife specific. "Experience is a big factor in getting into vet school; it's very competitive," she explains.

Neil applied for a Fellowship to gain the experience she felt would help her résumé. What she didn't anticipate was starting right after Hurricane Charley cut a swath through Southwest Florida, injuring thousands of animals. "It was a bit crazy," she says. "But it got me right into the work. I started working just a couple of hours after I got in; I just jumped right into it."

Neil has been accepted into the University of Illinois' veterinary school for the fall 2006 term. "I think that a lot of my experience as a Fellow helped my application," she says. "And there's a wildlife clinic at the school, so I hope to work there or volunteer there, and use the knowledge I've gained at C.R.O.W."

## EXTERNS

Externs rotate in and out of the last of the rooms in C.R.O.W.'s new on-site housing (the result of a recent capital campaign). "Generally speaking, externs are either natural science undergrads or vet students," says Pinder. An average stay is four to five weeks for an extern, although some stay longer. "They work primarily with patients in outdoor cages, do a lot of diet preparation, and hopefully they all get to do releases on occasion," says Pinder.

Externs are also encouraged to participate in the daily educational programs, which gives them experience interacting with the public. "Of the approximately 40 C.R.O.W. externs each year, most are college or veterinary students and come from all over the world, but rarely from Florida. More are needed in summer, when snowbird volunteers head north.

As always, C.R.O.W. is seeking volunteers to round out its help; trained hands will be given tasks including cage cleaning, diet preparation, patient pick-ups and transport, as well as helping with the on-site daily educational program and gift shop. "There is an interview process," says Pinder, who works closely with Birgie Vertesch, director of development.

For more information, visit [www.crowclinic.org](http://www.crowclinic.org). Readers wanting to volunteer should call 239-472-3644 and speak with Diana at Extension 1. 🐾

*Libby Boren McMillan has been a freelance writer for Times of the Islands since its inception and is a supporter of C.R.O.W. and its good work*

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