The sound of the doorbell startled Birgit Sommer awake. In the darkness, a teenage boy stood on her doorstep, holding a trap with a mother opossum and three young joeys inside. Three days earlier, the boy’s father had trapped the opossums and left them without food or water in the 100-degree Texas heat. After his father fell asleep, the teenager sneaked out of his house with the animals. “She was bloody all over, trying so hard, frantically, to get out,” Sommer says. “I got her through, though.”

Sommer runs Rainbow Wildlife Rescue from her home, and as nonprofit animal rescue workers know, frequent, all-hours interruptions are part of the job.

Drop-in visitors are the norm, and calls come in hourly. In 2010, Sommer received calls and took in animals from veterinarians, members of the military, game wardens and civilians in 46 counties. She rehabilitated 300 animals in 2010 in her own backyard, and was forced to turn away 2,000.

“I've taken animals from Kansas, for crying out loud,” Sommer said.

In 2006, Sommer answered the door to a more local visitor. The game warden of Erath County, Texas, stood outside. He asked her whether she had any squirrels. She answered that she did. He asked for her permit.

“Uh, what permit?” Sommer said. “So he wrote me a ticket for $155 for the illegal possession of a squirrel.”

She had been raising and rescuing animals for years based on what she learned auditing courses at nearby Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas. The five squirrels she currently had were brought to her by Stephenville's animal control, she said. Sommer never realized a permit was required. Someone on an online forum found out she was working with squirrels without a permit and turned her in, she said.

The squirrel was euthanized. “So you can kill it,” Sommer said, “but you can't save it.”
The next day, she said, Stephenville police officers knocked on her door to show their support. They said if she were fined again, they would take up a collection to pay the fee.

“It kind of pushed me forward,” Sommer said. “It gave me the incentive to get legal and do this right.”

From Dallas, the drive southwest to Rainbow Wildlife takes about an hour. After leaving major highways and passing Benbrook, Granbury and Toler, visitors arrive in Stephenville. One tenth of a mile from US-377 and a few quick turns into a residential area, a small rainbow-bedecked sign marks Sommer's home. From the street, visible structures made of wood lattice, wire mesh and camouflage netting peek over the chain-link fence.

In one of the enclosures, baby raccoons play on a tree branch, climbing upside-down like monkeys.

“Come here, sweeties,” Sommer says. One of the kits eats pieces of dog food from a bucket with its paws like a child absentmindedly snacking from a bowl of chips.

Sommer wears a purple tie-dye T-shirt with a dove on it, khaki capri pants and slide sandals. She speaks with a slight German accent, has a quick smile, and wears her dark, wavy hair long.

The five raccoons were brought to her for different reasons. Three of the kits were orphaned when the mother was shot accidentally, one was hit by a car and another was found by children at a birthday party.

Once Sommer rehabilitates the raccoons, she performs what is called a soft release. She has a list of volunteers with substantial acreage and no high fences, who live far from traffic and will provide the raccoons with some food while they transition to full independence.

Rainbow Wildlife moved to Weatherford, Texas, in July. One family, the Starks, helped tear down structures “for four weekends, every Friday, every Saturday and every Sunday all day long,”
Sommer said. “They were sweating in this heat for us; they were doing all the heavy lifting that we couldn't do.”

At the new location, a few cages are set up, but most are in pieces, leaning against the fence of the spacious backyard. Sommer hopes to get as many people involved as possible in the rebuilding effort.

The rescue closed briefly while structures were rebuilt so they could be inspected by Texas Parks & Wildlife for a permit. “Every day I turn away animals,” Sommer said at the time. “I have to rebuild the wildlife rescue first.”

In Stephenville, “they don't let me build any more, and raccoons are against city ordinances,” Sommer said. “I mean, they're tolerated right now, but you know, if somebody complains, I'm out of here. So I finally found a nice place with an acre where I can just put my cages up.”

After receiving the ticket for illegal possession of a squirrel, Sommer renovated to meet facility requirements and minimum cage size restrictions. A Stephenville game warden made a state inspection, and Rainbow Wildlife now holds federal and state permits.

“I mean, if you think immigration was hard, try to get a permit for that,” Sommer said. “I eventually had it all together, sent it in, and they blocked me for a year because of that [squirrel] citation.”

During that year, Sommer worked with the animals she could without a permit, such as sparrows, starlings and exotic pets rescued from Craigslist. “Craigslist babies is what I call them,” she said.

Now, though, she has had interns through Tarleton, which worked with her for a wildlife management program. The interns, wildlife management or pre-veterinary students, are registered on her permit as well. Last year, an agriculture class raised money, found lumber donations, and began building a combination office and nursery to put on her empty lot. But the city red-tagged it and
Rainbow Wildlife had to tear it down. The frame and roof were complete, so the structure is now stored in a friend's barn.

“This is something I can have rebuilt out there [in Weatherford] because I will not have any city restrictions,” she said.

Inside the house, Sommer sits at her desk with a syringe and a small plastic bottle within reach – a baby animal feeding equipment. A blind yellow Labrador retriever and Great Dane lie on the floor next to a Chihuahua as a cat climbs a stair-shaped ledge to its food bowl.

Everyone knows what a house with too many animals can smell like. Pet stores, animal shelters or small homes overrun with pets often develop an acrid, nose-wrinking reek. That smell is completely absent from this house, which has seen more than 4,000 animals. How does she do that?

Sommer can see a live video feed of three of her enclosures using security cameras. She checks on the animals and monitors their behavior right on her computer screen. This allows her to study their behavior inconspicuously.

A typical day for Sommer doesn't have a beginning and end.

“I would say I'm 24-7,” she said.

Baby opossums must be tube-fed every two hours at night. Sommer doesn't set an alarm. She wakes naturally with her internal clock. “And then you have the birds during the day that want food every 30 minutes from sunrise to sunset,” she said.

A few months ago, Sommer had to go to the emergency room because of exhaustion. “I was talking to my friend, and the next thing I know, she was smacking me. I was on the ground,” she said. “I just kept falling asleep involuntarily. I was so dead tired that laying down, standing up, didn't make a difference.”

Doctors put her on bed rest for four weeks.
“It was springtime,” she said. “I had 60 possums. I had 20 squirrels. I had about 30 rabbits. It was crazy. So yes, it can get ugly.”

Birgit's husband, Yann Sommer, said everything he and Birgit do is planned around the animal residents and their feeding schedules. “Birgit's phone is constantly ringing, at least every 10 minutes,” he said. “And she is feeding and cleaning up after her animals frequently, as in at least once an hour.”

Yann said Birgit loves all animals. “She says she was born that way, to help nature do some human damage control.”

He loves animals, too, but it breaks his heart to see them in distress, as is often the case in rescue situations. Yann said he admires Birgit for doing the work he could never imagine doing. He works as a network specialist for the state of Texas.

As a little girl in Germany, Birgit Sommer said her parents wouldn't allow her to have pets, but she always wanted one. At the age of five, her grandmother was already referring to her as Miss Dolittle, after Dr. Dolittle, a character who can speak to animals and treats them instead of people. The name stuck.

“I came home from school and I had something behind me, it was a cat or a dog or something,” she said. “We just kept being drawn to each other.”

Sommer said she felt a little like an outsider, that people didn't relate to her focus on animals. “My mom,” Sommer laughed, “she even took me to a shrink – ‘She's obsessed with animals. Do something. Give her some pills.’” She said the psychiatrist ended up prescribing her mother medication for anxiety.

Her parents never relented, so the first thing she did when she moved out was take a job at a pet store. She said it was horrible, and she could never do it again, but in Germany there was no real need for animal rescue workers.
She went to business school at her parents' behest. “There was not much I had to say about it,” she said. “But as soon as I got out of there I applied at a zoo.”

Working at zoos and wildlife parks in Germany, she found the environment academically competitive. She said they wanted her to have a biology degree before they would let her touch anything.

“And then I came here,” she said. “I finally was needed, I got something to do.”

Sommer’s first husband was an American army soldier. She met him in Germany and they were married when he returned from Desert Storm. He was stationed in San Antonio. “That was it for me,” she said. “Texas took my heart and soul.”

In the mid-nineties, Sommer had a 10-acre rescue operation mainly focused on horses and dogs. A flash flood destroyed the property in 1996. That’s when she moved to Wisconsin. After three years, she divorced her first husband. She later met Yann, who is also from Germany, online. Together, they moved back to Texas.

When she first moved to Stephenville in 2000, Sommer began doing volunteer work at the animal shelter. But she saw an unaddressed need – no one was taking care of wildlife.

“If somebody brought in a squirrel or a bird they would just put it down,” she said. “No questions asked.”

Sommer began seeking advice on how to start a rescue operation. She built cages and brought animals home. She took online courses and audited classes at Tarleton, such as avian biology.

Sommer has some help. Harvey Baptist Church found out via Facebook that Rainbow Wildlife needed help moving to a new location. They offered assistance and the use of their flatbed trailer.

Local Boy Scouts of America and National Eagle Scouts collected money and supplies to build a chain-link and privacy fence and a large wooden frame for a flight cage to meet regulations for a federal bird permit.
“I just love to work with the Boy Scouts on this,” she said. “It's a great opportunity for the kids.”

Recently, she started a foster care program for local dogs. The group travels to Glen Rose, Dublin, and other surrounding cities, rescuing dogs that are about to be euthanized from shelters. Volunteers drive three hours to Kaufman County to get the dogs spayed or neutered at a discounted rate, then list them on Petfinder.com.

“Maybe we can just start a big network,” Sommer said, “Because they need it everywhere – everywhere. Five million dogs and cats get euthanized every year in this country.”

Monetary help comes from fundraisers and pledge drives. Sommer purchased an iPad 2, which the dog foster group raffled off, earning $1,000.

Loree Behymer, a foster coordinator and Rainbow Wildlife sub-permittee, said, “Since the Rainbow Wildlife Rescue is totally not-for-profit, if there are no donations, the money comes from Birgit's pocket.”

The best way the community can support the organization is through donations of money, time or materials, Behymer said.

Most of the work she does is focused on fundraising. Rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife is not cheap. For example, raising an orphaned raccoon costs about $500.

Animal rescue worker Tia Wood works with Sommer's foster care group for dogs. Milk replacers, bottles, habitat or incubator supplies and monetary donations are what keep non-profits going. “Volunteers and new foster homes are desperately needed and welcomed with open arms,” Wood said.

Donations come in through various websites Sommer maintains, which also have wish lists of supplies Rainbow Wildlife needs. Because she is so overloaded, Sommer puts her knowledge about
caring for wildlife and baby animals online in articles and videos so people who find an animal can help it right away.

Just doing a Google search for the name of an animal followed with “Texas” and “rescue,” is likely to return three or four of Sommer's websites. That’s how many people who bring animals to Rainbow Wildlife or seek Sommer's advice find her.

Around 1 million people per month visit one of her most popular domain names, kittenbaby.com. Ads on the site earn Rainbow Wildlife about $300 a month, which goes toward formula to feed baby animals.

When Hurricane Ike struck the Gulf Coast on Sept. 13, 2008, it was baby squirrel season. That day, Sommer's phone rang endlessly – 150 times, she said. She contacted the ASPCA for help, and they responded with a plan to set up trailer stations so people could bring the babies they found. According to the Abilene Reporter-News, the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council contacted Sommer to tell her more than 900 baby squirrels had been dropped off at the Wildlife Rehabilitation & Education Center in Houston, Texas.

Texas Parks & Wildlife made arrangements with wildlife departments in Louisiana and New Mexico to carry the squirrels across state lines to rehabilitators. Sommer took 15 of the orphaned baby squirrels from the Mckinney SPCA of Texas back to Rainbow Wildlife.

What Sommer really needs, is someone to help with public relations and paperwork. “I'm the only person who is doing this,” she said. “It's just crazy.”

She prefers dealing with the animals over attending events and running fundraisers. She does as much as possible online, tapping away at her keyboard with one hand and feeding a baby animal with the other. She gives presentations at civic clubs and schools. She just can’t do it all, she said, not without a lot of help.
“I wish I had a partner, and my husband, bless his heart, he's carrying all the bills,” she said.

“He loves animals, but he can't be a part of it, having a daytime job and all that.”

Sommer also relies on others to help her transport and rescue animals. She doesn't drive, which not everyone understands.

Callers sometimes become upset because she can't pick up animals off the street.

“I raise babies and release them, she said. “I'm not running out to rescues. I wish I could, but then my babies starve to death at home.”

A police scanner occasionally squawks through Sommer's home. She likes to be prepared in case Stephenville Animal Control is bringing her an animal that needs emergency assistance.

Scott Whiteley, a Stephenville Animal Control officer, said he and co-workers used to drop off baby birds, owls and other small animals such as kittens that needed bottle feeding. After they were raised, they would be released if they were wild, or find homes through the animal shelter. He said they don't bring her animals very much anymore, since she is relocating.

Many Stephenville residents request traps, capture raccoons, and bring them to Animal Control. “Every raccoon they trap, they euthanize,” she said. “Instead of bringing to me.”

A Rainbow Wildlife blog post from April 6, 2010, reads: “I just got back from introducing ‘Project Saving Stephenville's Wildlife’ to the City Council. I hope it finds support and will go through the necessary channels to be approved.”

Her petition, “Project Saving Stephenville's Wildlife,” proposed Animal Control officers drop off healthy, trapped raccoons, opossums, rabbits and squirrels at Rainbow Wildlife, which was less than half a mile from the shelter. If she evaluated an animal as suitable for release, she would transport it to a soft release property at least 10 miles from where it was collected.
The plan, she said, would be to install trail cameras, microchip released animals to assist in a state research project on relocation adjustment, and vaccinate them for rabies as part of the USDA trap-vaccinate-release program.

Sommer said she asked the council to make an amendment so trapped wildlife could be saved instead of euthanized. “I have relocation, I have so many places out in the country that are willing and tolerate these animals and where they're supported,” she said.

The issue was dropped from lack of interest.

Sommer has permits for one raccoon, Freddy, to be handled by the public for educational purposes and to serve as an “ambassador of his species.” She takes Freddy to schools so children can get to see a raccoon that isn't “dead on the street or hunted by Dad or hanging off a keychain, for example,” she said.

But it's important to Sommer that others come away with a realistic understanding of wild animals. She said she doesn't want to go into a classroom with a raccoon on her back so students will think it's cute and decide they want one.

Every October and November, Sommer takes phone calls about feral animals taken in as babies in the spring, which have gotten bigger, older and wilder. Last year, she ended up with 25 raccoons that were raised as pets and had become too much to handle.

“They become wild once they're six months old, and then they get rough, the hormones kick in,” she said. “Then they start biting and fussing and taking things apart. So I end up with them.”

She dissuades Rainbow Wildlife from petting the animals, which Sommer says is a big no-no. Since the animals will be released once they are rehabilitated, it isn't safe for them to get too used to people.

“And they need to learn to relate to each other, not a human,” she said.
Sometimes, there isn't anything Sommer can do. She often tells callers to put baby cottontail rabbits back in the nest.

“When their eyes are still closed, they will die, period,” she said. “It's cruel for me to raise them for three weeks, and then have them die,” she said.

Sommer said baby birds are also extremely difficult to care for and should be returned to the nest when possible. The old wives’ tale about mother birds rejecting their young if they catch human scent on them is a myth, she said. Birds do not have a strong sense of smell.

Other times, animals die because of cruelty, neglect or violence. Sommer has seen dogs come in at half their usual body weight, or wildlife in need of amputations after being caught in traps. She has a Chihuahua named Doogle whose back legs are undeveloped because a breeder raised him in a birdcage, hanging from the ceiling for five years.

Doogle couldn't walk at all when she got him but now rushes out into the yard to greet visitors.

In addition to continuing the dog rescue, Sommer said she would like to own a coatimundi sanctuary in the future. There isn't a rescue in Texas for these members of the raccoon family, native to South America, which resemble reddish raccoons with long, lemur-like tails and an extended muzzle like an anteater's. Coatimundis are often bought as exotic pets and abandoned when they grow too big to handle.

With the additional space she has in her new location, she would also like to add a pond so she can rehabilitate waterfowl and a large enclosure for deer. And she would like to get a federal permit to work with foxes and bats.

In the next 10-20 years, Sommer said she hopes Rainbow Wildlife will be more focused on education. “I want to find a program that makes an impact,” she said.

It’s hard to put limits on herself.
“For five years I've been saying I'm not going to take any bunnies and just last night at 8 o'clock, banging on my door, [someone] had the little bunny,” she said. “How can I say no, you know?”
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