

**TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Rhonda Murgatroyd

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

**DATE:** December 7, 2023

**LOCATION:** Seabrook, Texas

**SOURCE MEDIA:** M4A, MP3 audio files

**TRANSCRIPTION:** Trint, David Todd

**REEL:** 4181

**FILE:** BrownPelican\_Murgatroyd\_SeabrookTX\_7December2023\_Reel4181.mp3

**David Todd** [00:00:03] Okay. Well, good afternoon.

**David Todd** [00:00:05] I'm David Todd, and I have the privilege of being here with Rhonda Murgatroyd.

**David Todd** [00:00:10] And with her permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas at Austin.

**David Todd** [00:00:32] And she would have all equal rights to use the recording as she sees fit.

**David Todd** [00:00:36] And I wanted to make sure that that's okay with her. What do you think, Rhonda?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:00:42] Yes, absolutely. Oh, good. All right.

**David Todd** [00:00:45] Well, let's get started then.

**David Todd** [00:00:46] Again, my name is David Todd. I'm representing a small non-profit called the Conservation History Association of Texas. And I'm in Austin.

**David Todd** [00:00:55] And we are conducting a remote interview with Rhonda Murgatroyd, who is based in the Seabrook area. It is Thursday, December 7th, 2023. It's about 2:50 p.m. Central Time.

**David Todd** [00:01:10] Ms. Murgatroyd is the owner and managing director of Wildlife Response Services, L.L.C., which is located in the Houston/Galveston area. Individually and through her firm, she has been involved in wildlife rehabilitation and oiled wildlife care in Texas and many other states since 1998, treating animals injured in more than 80 spills, including the Deepwater Horizon incident of 2010 and 2011, where she served as wildlife branch director.

**David Todd** [00:01:40] Today, we'll talk about Ms Murgatroyd's life and career to date and especially focus on what she's learned about the care and recovery of injured wildlife.

**David Todd** [00:01:51] So, with that ... first, thank you. And then, I thought maybe we could start with some questions.

**David Todd** [00:01:59] I thought it'd be good to start with a question about your childhood and early years. And I was wondering if you could point to any people or events in your early life that might have gotten you interested in animals and wildlife rehabilitation.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:02:16] Sure. I was born in Beaumont, Texas, but my grandparents, from my mother's side, lived in a little town called Warren, Texas, and they had a farm. So, summers were spent on that farm and basically capturing, capturing and rehabilitating animals that didn't even really need to be rehabilitated. But that's where I found my love for animals.

**David Todd** [00:02:44] Very nice. And did your grandparents or your parents encourage this activity, or is this something that you kind of explored on your own?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:02:52] Oh, I think they just humored a young child, thinking that I needed to rescue every little animal out in the woods. So, they didn't discourage me. I'll say that.

**David Todd** [00:03:11] So, what kind of animals were you bringing home to work with?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:03:15] Oh, I would bring home little squirrels, rabbits, fawns (there were a lot of white-tailed deer around), little feral hogs, things like that. And any little bird that I could get my hands on, I brought it home. And unfortunately, at that stage, I was so young, I didn't really know what I was doing. So, quite a few of them didn't make it, unfortunately. I'm glad that over the years I made a little bit of improvement in what I do in my in my day-to-day work.

**David Todd** [00:03:50] Were a lot of these animals injured, or were they just young that had fallen out of their nest or left their lair?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:03:56] Some were injured and some I just found on my journey as I traipsed through the woods of East Texas.

**David Todd** [00:04:07] Okay. So, that may have been the scene in Warren, Texas, at your grandparents' place. Did you have any peers that might have been interested in this, too? Any childhood friends that might have enjoyed the same thing?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:04:26] All of my cousins. We all, as a little group of kids, all were interested in the same types of things, of course, because in the woods there are animals everywhere. Not to mention the fact that we all had dogs. My parents raised dogs. They bred German Shepherds and Doberman Pinschers. So, that was the domestic side of life.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:04:48] The wildlife side came when I was up at my grandparents' farm of course. There weren't a whole lot of wildlife there on the property in Beaumont. All of that happened mostly in Warren.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:05:03] And then, I went on to, I went to school to be a dental hygienist, believe it or not. And that led me to realize that I didn't really want to be in four walls, that I needed to be outside. So the only thing that remains of my dental hygiene training is I still use water picks and some dental tools to take care of the animals in my day-to-day care, both in rehabilitation and in oil spill response.

**David Todd** [00:05:38] That's great. Well, nothing goes to waste.

**David Todd** [00:05:41] So, you mentioned that you went to school for dental hygiene. Did you did you find that there were any folks, maybe possibly before, you know, when you were in grade school, high school, people or events that you had exposure to then that might have encouraged this wildlife interest that you had?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:06:04] Beyond just as a very young child finding the animals, I always had animals in my care. I don't know how. I found animals no matter where I went. I just gravitated towards them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:06:17] And I guess what really kicked off the actual legal way to take care of wildlife was when my oldest daughter was about 18 months old I guess I found a little orphaned baby squirrel. And I located a rehabilitation group in my area down by Clear Lake, Texas, and I just started volunteering with them and working with them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:06:46] And of course, that's a group of people who almost their whole day was spent taking care of wildlife. So that's sort of how I segued in from being a 24-hour a day mommy to splitting some of that time and taking care of little orphaned animals.

**David Todd** [00:07:06] Well, so was most of your training in wildlife rehab from people that you knew or, you know, just your own kind of exposure outside? Or, did you read any books that might have encouraged this, or seen TV shows or seen movies that were kind of inspiring?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:07:25] Oh, I think we all saw Bambi. Bambi was one of my favorite shows, of course, when I was younger. And, you know, there were a lot of Disney movies that had animals in them, and I watched those shows all the time.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:07:40] But really, so I guess that really, in my younger years, was the way that I kicked off my interest in wildlife. And then finding that one little squirrel: that became a passion of mine. I guess I always had that passion, but it became more of a permanent type of passion at that point in my life. And I never stopped after that. I just took more and more animals in.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:08:09] And with that group of people, that group of rehabilitators, we met, you know, constantly and then had a proper meeting once a month with a lot of rehabilitators. And so, we all just learned from one another.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:08:24] And yes, there obviously was a lot of reading. And being a part of a national group, the National Wildlife Rehabilitator Association, so that national group that has a lot of veterinarians within the whole group as a whole, that helped with the medical side.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:08:45] And then, of course, the hands-on stuff came. I mean, you don't really learn how to take care of wildlife unless you have wildlife in hand.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:08:53] So, it really is a network of people throughout the country that all help each other. And, you know, maybe you've run across something that someone else hasn't. And, you know, with that group, you can post those questions or those learnings, and then it helps the community as a whole.

**David Todd** [00:09:14] So, let me see if I've got the chronology right. You started with this wildlife rehabilitation group in in Clear Lake in what year?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:09:27] Oh, my goodness. It had to be 1996 or '97.

**David Todd** [00:09:37] Okay. And so you're volunteering with them for nearly a decade. And then, my understanding is that in 2006, you start Wildlife Response Services. Is that right?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:09:50] Yes. So, that volunteer wildlife rehabilitation that I was doing, it was my passion. Wildlife is my passion. Taking care of injured and orphaned animals is my passion. And I took that and I turned that into a way that I earn a living.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:10:09] So, you have to have federal and state permits in order to handle wildlife - any day, any wildlife. So, with that, I started working with oil companies that might have oil releases. And so, having those permits allowed me to help those oil companies with the animals that are impacted when a spill happens.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:10:38] And I, and that I still do that today, which is a reason why I told you I have a hotline phone sitting beside me because oil spills can happen any time. So, I have to be prepared and have that phone with me always - day and night. It stays with me right beside the bed every day. If I go to a movie, it's on. If I'm driving, it's on. Unfortunately, no matter where I go, be it a wedding, a funeral, whatever, the phone is with me.

**David Todd** [00:11:14] Well, it sounds like this has become a way of life.

**David Todd** [00:11:19] Can you sort of turn back the clock to 2006 and recall what it was like in starting this firm, Wildlife Response Services? How did it first begin?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:11:33] Well, I had already been working with another organization that did, of course, the day-to-day rehabilitation. But they also had a team that did oil spill response. And it got to a point where there were just ways of running a business that I wanted to do a little bit differently. And so, I thought that I should start my own company. I had some other acquaintances that said, "Oh, you can do it." And I said, "Yeah, but what if...?" And they said, "Well, what if...? You can fix that." And so with every problem I came up with, they had an answer.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:12:16] So, Wildlife Response Services was born, kicked off, and I've never stopped.

**David Todd** [00:12:23] How would you describe the sort of program, scope, of Wildlife Response Services? Does it just focus on spills? Or, does it extend to other kinds of incidents that might injure wildlife?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:12:38] Well, recently there was a fire about an hour from where my home is. And that's happened more than once. And obviously, animals get caught up in fires as well. So, I went up and helped and captured animals with that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:12:59] It used to be that I only responded to oil spills, but recently there seem to be more and more chemical spills, which, you know, for me, is not the safest

thing to go into. But the people that I work with make sure that it's safe for humans before we go in to capture wildlife.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:13:17] So now, yes, we do chemicals, we do oil, we do fire. Sometimes companies just want me to put hazing or deterrents to keep animals out of the way of where they're working. So, we do that as well.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:13:36] There was one project where a city was draining a very, very large pond and they knew it had a lot of turtles and there were a lot of birds around. So, they actually hired my company to come in and relocate those animals. Because we know how to handle turtles and birds, it made sense. So, it wasn't an incident at all. It was just something that someone was being proactive and making sure that those animals were taken care of.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:14:05] So, yeah, we do things that are a little bit outside of spill response sometimes.

**David Todd** [00:14:11] Okay. It sounds like spills are maybe your, so to speak, bread and butter. So maybe we could talk a little bit about spills. I think I read that you have been, with Wildlife Response Services, involved and responded to over 80 spills - that's a lot - since 2007. And I was wondering if you can remember some of the more memorable events that you've been involved with of that kind.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:14:43] Yeah, I think the one that interests people the most: it used to be that every spill was really focused on birds. That's what everybody sees. They don't see all of those other terrestrial-type animals - the turtles, the frogs, the lizards and things like that. But a couple of years ago we had a really interesting spill where we had over 300 alligators in varying sizes, from six feet down to basically just hatched. So that kind of piques people's interest when you're working with a bunch of alligators. It was a very interesting spill, definitely different from birds and things like that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:15:28] So, and then we also have other, a couple of other jobs where we worked with American beaver. That's also a very, very interesting time. Both of which are very dangerous animals and can hurt you. Birds are a little bit easier to work with.

**David Todd** [00:15:48] Okay. Now I wanted to just take a moment. Are you maybe handling something near the microphone. I'm getting a little bit of an odd sound. Okay. Well...

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:16:01] Did it stop?

**David Todd** [00:16:02] No, no, It's just I'm hearing a little thud-thud.

**David Todd** [00:16:07] That!

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:16:07] I wonder if it was rubbing on my shirt or something.

**David Todd** [00:16:12] It could be that. Yeah, well, they're just really particular and sensitive, so you might just be wary.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:16:20] Be very, very still.

**David Todd** [00:16:21] Be very still. Don't move. Don't worry. It'll be okay. But might be just aware of that.

**David Todd** [00:16:30] So, it sounds like there are lots of different kinds of fluids and materials in these spills. What are the typical chemicals that you see in Texas spills?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:16:42] Oh, I don't know of the names of the chemicals. I'm not really, I hate to say I don't really pay that close attention. I do look to the SDSs [Safety Data Sheets] when we're on the spill. And we do make sure that we're using the proper types of gloves and things like that while we're in the spill.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:17:05] But names of chemicals, I look to the safety officer to help me through all of that and just make sure that I'm using the right equipment to protect myself and my team.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:17:18] We work a lot with diesel and I would guess, for the most part, we really work with a lot of crude oil. But it seems that lately, diesel and maybe, I guess it's been more diesel, just diesel and crude oil recently.

**David Todd** [00:17:51] Okay. And what are the typical kind of incidents that cause these releases? Is there any kind of pattern to what the factors might be that cause these spills?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:18:05] Well, the pattern used to be, long ago, kind of when I first started this, it was typically vessels spilling oil. Lately, it's been more pipelines because, of course, we have an aging pipeline system out in the Gulf, and across the U.S. There are some new pipelines coming in, as we all know, some that are very controversial. But for the most part, I think that the spills that happen are with the aging pipeline system that we have. I would say a little bit, I've had a couple of railcar incidents. But for the most part, it's that aging pipeline structure.

**David Todd** [00:18:57] And so, these spills are typically on land? Or are you finding that some of these leaks are happening offshore?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:19:05] Well, they're both. There are spills both offshore and onshore, and we respond to both of those. Seems like recently there have been more onshore. And what happens, if it happens on land and it gets into a water body, that's pretty much when I'm called in, because typically, if it's just going on land onto soil, it's a much easier cleanup than when it gets into water, travels down a creek or a stream or a river or something like that.

**David Todd** [00:19:40] You know, there's a long history of oil spills in Texas and elsewhere. And I was wondering if there are any that have just, maybe not ones that you've been involved with personally, but just in the lore, you know, talking to other rehabilitators, might have come to mind. The ones that I'm familiar with include Ixtoc, back in '79, the Apex barges, which I guess were on the Ship Channel in 1990, the Mega Borg, same year, Chemical Supplier in 2009, and the Eagle Otome in the next year, 2010. Did you have any role in those or do you know anything about those incidents?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:20:28] So several of them are before my time, thankfully. The Chemical Supplier, yes, I was involved in that one. I was involved in the Eagle Otome. And what was the next one you mentioned?

**David Todd** [00:20:45] Well, there's the Mega Borg.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:20:47] No, I wasn't here for that one.

**David Todd** [00:20:49] A little earlier. Yeah, those two - Chemical Supplier and Eagle Otome. I guess that's 2009, 2010. What do you remember about them? You know, can you sort of take us back to that moment?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:21:05] So, interestingly, neither of those spills impacted a high number of wildlife. There was wildlife in both of them. More in Eagle Otome than the other. But, it was mostly birds in those. And of course, both of those were in a ship channel. So obviously, you're going to be working with more pelicans and gulls and things like that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:21:41] It's when you move a little bit further inland that you end up with turtles. You might have red-eared sliders, river cooters, three-toed box turtles, all of those sorts of things, if you're further inland.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:21:58] But the Eagle Otome and the Chemical Supplier, both being on the ship channel there, it was more birds for those two.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:22:08] And I think that we all, even if I wasn't involved in the Ixtoc, we all know about it. So I have done a couple of drills, with some drills where we work with both Mexico and U.S. So, thankfully, nothing has happened recently, but we are, as an oil spill community, still working together just in case something is to happen. So even though the general public doesn't really hear about all of that training that we do, we actually do train yearly on what we would do if these types of things happened.

**David Todd** [00:22:50] Well, I'm sure that helps avoid all sorts of tripping over one another, just to have seen this before, thought through it, practiced it.

**David Todd** [00:23:02] Well, speaking of that, do you think that the spill responses, the kind of practices that are used in reaction to a spill have changed since the early days, I think Torrey Canyon or Santa Barbara, those early days? Do you feel like they've found methods that worked really well to deal with wildlife that may have been injured?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:23:28] There are several organizations. I think that the one that I would put up at the top is over in California - the universities that do a lot of research on what works and what doesn't. We don't typically do research in the middle of a spill response, although sometimes birds are banded and sea turtles may have tags put on them or radio transmitters. So, there is some research that's done during a spill with California. They have a lot of natural seeps. So, I believe that they have the opportunity to do more research than anybody because they have birds showing up with oil on them from time to time that that they can do a little research on when they're not in that stressful situation of a big oil spill.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:24:28] We did some of that during the Deepwater Horizon, and there's been a lot of studies done post Deepwater Horizon.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:24:36] So, I think that, as a community, we're always learning. We try new things sometimes in spills. For instance, a little trick that we're using now is, with

crude oil, it's really hard to break it down. One of the easiest things we found to break down crude oil is olive oil.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:24:57] So, everybody knows that Dawn is used to wash oil off of wildlife. But sometimes, Dawn just doesn't cut it. It just isn't enough. So, over the years, we have figured out new and different ways of doing things. And it always is to the benefit of the wildlife.

**David Todd** [00:25:22] Okay. So, I guess part of the nature of these responses is having the right, you know, tools, the right chemicals, having the Dawn, having the olive oil. But I understand that there's also a structure, an incident command system that you all use that makes sure that there's a good, I guess, chain of command, and, you know, that people are well organized when they're working under these kind of emergency situations. Can you talk about that?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:25:54] Sure. So, when a wildlife responder is stood up, asked to mobilize to a spill, we go in, and the first place we go is to the Environmental Unit, which sits under Planning. And so, wildlife is in Environmental Planning at the outset of a spill response. As soon as we have a plan, when we get that plan written, we move over to Operations and we work for the Operations section chief. Now, that doesn't mean that we move all the way completely from Environmental, because obviously wildlife and habitat is environmental.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:26:35] So, what we typically do is leave a liaison in the Environmental Planning unit and conduct our operations by working for the Operations section chief. Going into an org chart, I mean, it could go on and on and on because Wildlife, first, you know, you have your branch, your Wildlife branch director. And under that Wildlife branch director, you have somebody that's in charge of rehabilitating birds. You have somebody that's in charge of capturing birds. You have someone that is in charge of sea turtles, somebody that's in charge of cetacea.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:27:17] So, that org chart can become quite large. But, it's a good thing because it helps you with the span of control so that one person isn't trying to do everything. So, that way each person could do the best job in the area that they're working on, and not have to worry about what's going on, on the other side over there, even if it's split - marine mammals and sea turtles tend to go together to a point, and then they split off on that org chart. Birds, typically, birds typically take on the terrestrial animals as well.

**David Todd** [00:28:02] Well, that's interesting. I imagine it can be really chaotic if you don't get people sort of sequestered in different areas and on different kinds of problems.

**David Todd** [00:28:13] Well, so I think we've talked mostly about, you know, pretty dramatic accidents, you know, certainly the Chemical Supplier or Eagle Otome. But I understand that sometimes, and maybe this is akin to the natural seeps that they have in California, but there are these, you know, "unknown sheens", I think they're called, where there's just some sort of background, ongoing source that may be difficult to really isolate. Have you worked on problems like that?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:28:47] I have had a few of those. And typically, what happens is it's either, you're either working under the Coast Guard or the EPA. And so, there have been times where the incident has been stood up under the Coast Guard or under EPA. And I've been



hired by by those federal agencies or by the OSRO, which is the Oil Spill Response Organization that's cleaning up the oil. I can work under that group as well.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:29:18] The thing to keep in mind is that even though they tend to be very small, even sheen can disrupt the feather structure in a bird, and sheen can burn a turtle or a snake or a frog. So, it can be a smaller amount of product, but it's still a detriment to the animals that come in contact with it.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:29:38] And those government agencies realize that and they still go ahead and stand up a wildlife branch alongside their cleanup contractors.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:29:49] So, yeah, I would say that actually that's the majority of the spills, those small ones that most people don't really hear about.

**David Todd** [00:30:00] Well, so I was intrigued listening to coverage, and this is just in the public media, so it's nothing that I have any special knowledge about, but they were talking about the Deepwater Horizon and this tension between different ways to deal with the spilled oil. And, you know, some folks were talking about, well, you need to use booms and try to just collect it. And then other folks say, no, you need to use dispersants to try to break down the oil and put it into the water column. And I was wondering, as a wildlife rehabilitator, do you have a viewpoint about what is better for the animals involved?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:30:45] I think, and probably anybody that you talk to, would probably say about the same: that there's a trade-off, that there is no perfect way to deal with oil, whether you're burning it in an in-situ burn, dispersing it. In my opinion, the worst thing that the oil can do is hit the shore, particularly if it's going into a marsh, or into mangroves, or going into rookeries where birds are nesting.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:31:20] Now, of course, if it's out to sea or out in the Gulf, then you've got all of the whales and the dolphins and turtles. So, no matter what, you are affecting something.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:31:34] And so, I just I feel like there is no perfect answer to that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:31:40] I know that when we do have in-situ burns, we're very careful and we make sure that we have observers out there to make sure that there are no animals caught up in that boom before the in-situ burn takes place. So, you know, there is a lot of caution taken.

**David Todd** [00:32:04] Well, good.

**David Todd** [00:32:05] So, I guess a lot of times these spills would be, you know, on the front pages of the newspapers (if we had newspapers anymore), or you know, they'd be front and center. And yet, I gather from, again reading about Deepwater Horizon, that some of these effects can last months, maybe even years after the initial spill. Have you seen that kind of impact, where it sort of trails on for a long time?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:32:37] So, my company is involved in the response. I don't typically get involved in the scientific studies that come after: that's typically a lot of academia and lots of scientists that are a lot smarter than me that are doing all of those studies.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:32:58] And, you know, I've done some reading and they have found some interesting things. And if you read all of that, you will see that scientists are saying that, yes, it does have a lasting effect. And anybody that understands the food chain understands that that goes all the way down to the tiniest organism in the water, which is eaten by something and then that's eaten by something larger. And then we go and we go shrimping and we eat the shrimp.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:33:34] So, yeah, I again, that's outside my scope. And I don't get involved in any of those typical natural resource type studies that they do, but they are done after every spill. There's typically an NRDA, a Natural Resource Damage Assessment done after the spills. And that is not something that my company is involved in. There are a lot of companies that are, that do really good jobs with that. That's just not, we're just there to take care of those live animals and get them back out into the environment.

**David Todd** [00:34:17] Good.

**David Todd** [00:34:19] Well, so we know the Texas coast handles a lot of crude and fuel and other chemicals. And I'm wondering if over the years you've found that there have been sort of a whole set of precautions that have developed against having leaks and spills, escapes and, you know, fugitive releases. Have you seen a change in the decades that you've been working in this area?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:34:54] In this area? Yes. I more and more spend my time, and my team, more and more is inland. It's lately become very rare that we're responding to a spill that happens out in the Gulf. It's almost always inland lately. I don't know if you saw recently there was a spill out in the Gulf, I guess, what, a month ago or so? And I was involved in that one as well. And that one is probably still in litigation, so I can't really discuss that one. But, even though they said that it was the biggest thing since the Deepwater Horizon (yeah, that is true because the Deepwater Horizon was large), and as reported, this one was as well, but I did not take any animals in then.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:35:59] So, and I think everything I just said was reported in the news as well.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:36:04] I did get calls from California, though, because they thought that probably we had a big mess in the Gulf. And it's really strange the way the currents work and the way the wave action works on oil. And, you know, sometimes oil is naturally dispersed.

**David Todd** [00:36:24] Yeah, I imagine the Gulf can be such a turbulent place that maybe that happens.

**David Todd** [00:36:33] Well, so we were just talking about offshore situations, but I imagine that, at least in the past, maybe not so recently, but with all the traffic in the Intracoastal Waterway and the, you know, Corpus Christi Ship Channel and the Houston Ship Channel, the Brownsville Ship Channel, I imagine there are a number of spills within those really close quarters. And I think that a lot of those areas are also under the overview of Homeland Security. And I'm wondering, is that an aspect of your work - trying to deal in these sort of secure areas?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:37:11] So, in order to work in those areas, you have to have a TWIC card or a transportation worker's identification credentials. So, many of my responders have TWIC cards, which is a higher level of security so that you can go on to those sites. So, the thing you do is make sure you have that before something happens because you don't get those credentials very quickly.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:37:36] So, we haven't had to use our TWIC cards recently. I have had to use them in spills in the past and in fact, the Chemical Supplier. I know that I used my TWIC card on that one because I had to get down to the port. And then I did some training at a couple of facilities where we had to have our TWIC cards as well.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:38:01] So, yes - we try to plan ahead and make sure that we have all the clearance that we might need for those types of areas.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:38:10] Now, not all of my personnel have spent the money and gone as far to go get a TWIC card. But, there's enough of us that if all we have to do is go on the site and collect the animals and we wouldn't do rehabilitation there. We would move them away from the site of the spill anyway. So I don't have to have everybody with a TWIC card. What we try to do is get as far away from where all the action is as possible because, you know, I don't want the people stressed or the animals stressed. And if either one is stressed that stresses the other one.

**David Todd** [00:38:51] That's really interesting. Not good for either.

**David Todd** [00:38:57] Well so, we talked about spills and I think you had mentioned in passing earlier that you had seen a fire not too far from your home and you had to respond to that. Are you having much experience with wildfires and having to deal with animals coming in for rehabilitation, or capturing them to try to get them out of harm's way?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:39:21] No, not with wildfires. This was actually a facility that burned up north of Houston. So, and then, they had a couple of retention ponds on site. So, that's what I was working with.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:39:36] Fortunately, we don't have as many wildfires. Like, in the news, if you watch it out on the West Coast, it's really terrible. They have to deal with that a lot.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:39:48] So, and I know we have been having a lot in Louisiana, but I haven't been called in by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries for that one.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:39:59] And I know that, it seems like natural disasters just keep growing, unfortunately. But I guess you would have to get into another conversation about climate change and all of that if you wanted to start talking about that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:40:19] And we have had changes in temperatures and it's a concern when we're responding. Really cold temperatures or really hot temperatures. It's hot, it's difficult on the people, it's difficult on the animals and trying to control the rehabilitation environment even. And in the cold, we are very particular about when we release animals, sometimes we've had to hold animals for an extra couple of months just because the weather was so bad.

**David Todd** [00:40:49] Well, you anticipated me because I was going to ask if if you find that Wildlife Response Services is called in to help, you know, after a hurricane or a serious freeze. I mean we've had the Memorial Day storm not too long ago. And then, of course, Hurricane Harvey and Ike. And, you know, there's usually, oh, one or two storms a year. Do you find that you get involved in those?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:41:23] So, yeah, pretty much we get involved every time there's a hurricane, we know that we're about to be called in because any typical sizable hurricane can generate around 2 to 300 spills. Sometimes it's just from vessels or boats in a marina, and then you have a pelican or some other animal that comes in there. You know, very small spills can be just as detrimental as really big spills.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:41:56] And when a hurricane comes in, and particularly on the Texas and Louisiana coast, there's a lot of facilities right on the Gulf Coast. And yeah, that disrupts a lot of tank farms and pumps and all sorts of things. Some of the, you know, the rigs offshore. We know when a hurricane's coming in to get our stuff together and be ready to be deployed.

**David Todd** [00:42:24] That's interesting. So, it sounds like the major impact is not from the storm itself, you know, from the high winds or the storm surge, it's from all the sort of repercussions, you know, these pumps and tank farms and rigs that get damaged. Is that right?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:42:44] Yeah. And they're damaged typically because they take on too much water or the wind destroys them. We go into some pretty bad areas after hurricanes. It's usually within just a few days. So, we, we take everything that we might need so that we don't disrupt what's already been disrupted in those areas. But yeah, we often take ourselves into hurricane-ravaged areas to take care of the wildlife. Other people are taking care of the people that have been affected. But we go in to take care of the animals.

**David Todd** [00:43:29] Well, and I guess taking care of these animals, the first thing you need to do is, is catch them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:43:34] Yeah.

**David Todd** [00:43:35] How do you go about capturing them or is that something that is delegated to other folks?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:43:40] So, a lot of times, the state and federal wildlife trustees capture. But there are times when they ask us to assist them. And then some states that we go into just don't have enough trustees to capture. So, I have teams that go out and do the capture. Every spill is different. With a hurricane, it may be that the state and federal trustees that are local, maybe their home is impacted or they have other things that they have to deal with. So we may be asked to be the sole capturing organization.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:44:17] And then, of course, before you capture, the first thing you have to have is a place to take them to if you do capture them. Because, you know, if we capture a bunch of animals and don't have anywhere to take them, then we're kind of in a bad way.

**David Todd** [00:44:36] And so, say you do get assigned the task of capturing some of these animals. Do you have Havahart traps or nooses? How do you go about capturing them?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:44:52] So, every animal, you use a different tool for all species. We utilize catch nets like, you know, your average fishing net, although I typically order much larger ones than your fisherman would use. We have catch poles that you've seen that animal control officers use. We have snake tongs, snake pinners, Havahart traps, a little bit of everything. Sometimes we've even built little noose traps: some little birds that you just, that are elusive and hard to capture, you can build little noose traps. And if you can figure out where it is that they're running and just put that down, there's just, you just have to think like the animal and figure out how to get them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:45:47] I guess with the turtles, I have a lot of turtle traps. There's several companies out there that you can order just about anything from. And if you call them and say, "Hey, I've got this problem", I tell you, some of those guys are very, they have a lot of ingenuity, as I call it, "Cajun ingenuity" or "redneck ingenuity".

**David Todd** [00:46:12] That's great.

**David Todd** [00:46:15] It sounds like there is just a great variety of animals that you see after these incidents. But can you talk about those that are more common, or those that seem to be most vulnerable, to spills or other kinds of accidents on the Texas coast?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:46:35] On the Texas coast, mostly, the birds that you see that kind of bob around on the water out there - like a pelican or a gull or a tern, something like that. Or, sometimes the oil glistens in the sun and it looks like a fish to some of these diving birds. And a brown pelican, for instance, might dive straight down into an oil slick because of just the way it dances on the water. And they may think that it's fish that they're diving after. So pelicans are very vulnerable. Gulls and terns, same thing.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:47:17] More in the rivers and streams, we look at a lot of softshell turtles, red-eared sliders, cooters, things like that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:47:28] We've even captured fish and relocated them to different parts of a stream. So, like I told you earlier, sometimes we do things that are a little out of the ordinary. I never really thought I'd be relocating fish, but we've done that now, so we've added that to our list.

**David Todd** [00:47:50] So, are there some species that are maybe more rare that you deal with? I mean, I'm thinking like you mentioned, the brown pelican, which I guess not too long ago was still on the endangered species list. But mostly thinking of whooping cranes or reddish egrets, piping plovers.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:48:08] So, we have had piping plover and we have had reddish egrets. Thank goodness, not the whooping crane. And we probably shouldn't talk about that because we don't want to wish bad things on ourselves. Those would be very, very difficult to rehabilitate in an oil spill. So we talk about it a lot in spill response and what we would do.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:48:39] You know, one of the things that we use a lot like ... so, I'm going to switch gears here a little bit and talk about caging because one of the things that we've started using a lot in spill response for caging for animals are tents. They're soft. The

birds can't really injure their wings on them. And I believe that would be a really easy thing, a very quick thing, to set up if we ended up with a whooping crane in rehab after a spill. Now, there may be others that have other ideas, but we just look for, for easy, quick things that work. And tents are relatively inexpensive. So, we feel like that would be a really good alternative to building a pen.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:49:39] There are lot of different, different ways that we house animals. What we do, when we build a pen, is try to make it look as close to their normal, natural habitat as possible to keep their stress level down. We may build a beach inside of a tent. We may go and buy cyclone fencing panels and line them with shade cloth or painter's cloth and build a beach inside one of those. We use a lot of different types of things. We use baby pens. I don't know if you know what I mean: a little pop-up like a human baby, a little pack-and-play. We use a lot of those. Those also are soft-sided. I don't really like using hard sided kennels because somehow animals tend to hurt themselves in things like that. We use a lot of totes. I go to a Dollar Store or a Wal-Mart and for an average-sized spill, I purchase every plastic tote they have in the place.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:50:49] I like to use white towels so that I can see any kind of fluids or anything coming from the bird. So I might go into a Wal-Mart and buy every single white towel they have too.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:51:04] So, but the problem with that after hurricanes, of course, is we don't want to take away what the general population may need, you know, because their homes may be destroyed and they need new blankets and sheets and towels. So, when I told you earlier that we, a lot of times, like to take everything with us, that goes as far as sheets and towels and things like that as well.

**David Todd** [00:51:31] That's really considerate.

**David Todd** [00:51:34] Well, so, it sounds like you've been lucky not to have to cope with a whooping crane. Rare and big and sharp as their bills are.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:51:45] Thankfully.

**David Todd** [00:51:47] What about any other stories of brown pelicans or reddish egrets or plovers?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:51:55] Well, we've done a lot of brown pelicans. So, thankfully, they are off of the T&E [Threatend & Endangered] species list. Really, brown pelicans are everywhere now. During the Deepwater Horizon, we had a lot of brown pelicans, and we had a lot of brown pelicans that got to take a ride in a Coast Guard plane to different areas of the country to get them out of the area of the impact. So, some went to Georgia, some came over here to Texas. You know, we couldn't, you can't just put them right back at the spill's still going on. So, yeah, the Coast Guard was able to fly a lot of brown pelicans to different locations to get them away.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:52:41] I do have a story about one of those brown pelicans. People often ask why we do what we do and does it really make a difference? Well, I believe it does.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:52:55] You know, we don't, we can't track every animal that we take care of and release. But there was a brown pelican that was captured. And before we

release these pelicans, we put these really big, bright pink leg bands on them. And someone sent us a picture of a pelican in Georgia with a pink leg band on a nest, with chicks. So that was proof-positive that what we do really does matter.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:53:28] I mean, the outcome we're looking for is to be able to rehabilitate an animal and put it back in the environment and let it do what it's supposed to do naturally, which is reproduce and create more baby pelicans or more baby reddish egrets or red-eared sliders, whatever it may be. That really is the goal, to get them back out in the population so that they can create more babies.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:53:56] So, I imagine that the some of the big concerns are with, I think you may have mentioned this earlier, with rookeries, where you've got this, you know, real concentration of birds, herons and egrets and so on. Can you tell us about any experiences of trying to help those?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:54:19] Well, during the Deepwater Horizon, we know, I mean, obviously, the spill was still out there when the birds were nesting on some of those barrier islands off of Louisiana. So, those rookeries become a really high priority to get encircled with boom so that the oil cannot get up onto the shorelines of those rookeries while there are nesting birds there, because you can't go into a rookery. When there's active nesting, you have to let them be.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:54:53] So, top priority in a spill response is to get boom around those islands and keep that oil away from the animals that are on those islands. And we took great care to do that.

**David Todd** [00:55:10] What about plovers, and I guess you mentioned gulls and terns that might be, you know, spending a lot of their time right on the beach and maybe getting exposed to any oil that might come ashore.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:55:23] So, what happens is there are ESI maps or Environmental Sensitivity Indexes. And pretty much the whole Texas coastline has been mapped by the Texas General Land Office. And all that information can be found in the TGLO toolkit. So, if we know where a spill is, we can actually go in there and look at those maps and see what kind of animals may be in each area at every time of the year. And that's sort of what we start looking at.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:55:59] And what it's called is an ISC [Incident Command System] 232, or resources at risk. So, as soon as we get to an incident command post and start building our plan, we look at what resources may be impacted and how can we protect those resources in those areas. If there's maybe a little inlet that could be blocked off, have some boom there so that the oil can't get up to where those resources may be, then that becomes a top priority.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:56:32] And then we also know if the product does get there, we know that we need to go get those animals. Sometimes, we preemptively capture animals and move them. Sometimes, we go and just put deterrents out to get birds moved away. If it's nesting going on there, we really do try to protect that area and keep the product from impacting them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:57:00] And like you said, the gulls and terns on a lot of these barrier islands, there have been times when our total job was to have a bunch of people walking on an

island to make sure that birds weren't coming in to that particular spot. But first, you have to make sure the nesting is already happening. If you can keep them away from a place where you know the trajectory of the oil is, then that's your best scenario.

**David Todd** [00:57:31] So, just to understand what you said before. Some of your crew might be trying to stop birds from coming into a rookery. How would they do that?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:57:42] No, no, not into a rookery. If there's no nesting going on. We can't keep them from coming into our rookery. If they need to take care of their babies, they need to come in and take care of them. In that case, we try really hard to keep the oil away.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:58:00] There has been an instance where all we did was walk an island where birds were known, like thousands of birds were known, to just come in and spend their evenings there. They just loafed in that spot. So, there were other places those birds could go. So, basically what we did was walked all day long. Humans are the best deterrent. So, all we did all day was walk and make those birds decide to go down to a different part of the beach.

**David Todd** [00:58:33] I see. So, these are just loafing areas, maybe feeding areas, but not nesting. I gotcha. All right.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:58:39] If they're already nesting, yeah, we can't deter them away from the nests. We just have to hope that the product doesn't get there, and do what we can to direct it somewhere else or put boom around the area so that the animals don't get in it.

**David Todd** [00:58:56] Well, let's say that, you know, some of these unfortunate creatures do get into the oil or the diesel or whatever might have spilled. What sort of health problems and injuries do you see?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:59:12] Well, if you don't get the oil off of them pretty quickly, you'll start seeing, externally, you'll see burns on their skin. You will see them trying to preen and they tend to... And the problem is, if they started adjusting a lot of the oil while they're preening, then you end up with internal issues. And the internal issues are oftentimes harder to deal with than the external issues. So, there are just different medications that the veterinarian might recommend.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [00:59:48] We don't always wash a bird the first day it comes in. So, they may have the opportunity to preen. And of course, that's what they want to do. They want to get that stuff off of their feathers. So, there have been times when we basically wrap the bird up so that it can't get to the oil until we can get them washed.

**David Todd** [01:00:12] And do you often see animals that maybe both have oil on their feathers, but may have been injured just, you know, trying to get away from the problem or, you know, say it's been a hurricane and they've damaged a wing. Do you do you see many broken bones?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:00:33] So, sometimes that does happen. The problem with that is you can't wash a bird that has a broken wing because it would be too painful. And unfortunately, what happens in those situations is euthanasia may be the best option.



**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:00:52] Now, if it's a bird that we found that has a broken wing, and does not have oil on it, we may take it to a local rehabilitator that has a veterinarian that might repair that wing. The problem comes in when you have the broken wing and the oil. So, that that is an issue.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:01:12] I have had turtles that had oil and it's easier with a turtle in sedating them to debride that and maybe flush the oil out of that and then go on to fix the turtle shell after you get that oil out of the tissues.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:01:34] But birds are, birds are a lot more difficult.

**David Todd** [01:01:42] So, say you get a bird that comes in. It's, you know, coated with oil. What is your typical first step, second step, third step to dealing with that problem?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:01:58] So, when an animal comes in, it should already have a chain of custody started by whoever the field team was that collected it so that we have the GPS coordinates of where it came from, who collected it, what time did they collect it, and what the level of oiling is. So, then it'll come in with a chain of custody and it will go immediately to medical intake and we'll determine what the issues are. What's the temperature? Is it holding its temperature? Is it lethargic or is it aggressive? So and in some cases we'll check blood values and make sure that that's okay.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:02:46] Again, we'll transfer a lot of that data from that CFC over to the medical intake form. We also, at this point, if they haven't already, or couldn't I.D. the animal, we try to go a little bit further and figure out what's the species, because some of them that wind up coated in oil, it's pretty hard to tell what they are, being a bird or a snake.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:03:11] And yes, we did rehabilitate a lot of snakes.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:03:16] So, the paper, the medical intake...

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:03:19] And then we put it into a pen, and well, after we give it some fluids. Typically, always, always give fluids, because animals are typically at least 10 to 20% dehydrated when they come in.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:03:34] And then we just put them in a pen, let them ... they typically get a heat lamp put on them. And let them get a little bit de-stressed.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:03:46] It may be two days before they, before we are able to wash them, if they're not healthy enough, depending on their weight and their temperature. And there's just a lot of different, a lot of different criteria that they have to meet before we can actually take them into a wash.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:04:08] And then after they're washed, they're dried. Then they're put into a reconditioning pen. And then there will be another, sometimes a veterinarian will visit. Sometimes the rehabilitation staff will determine if the animal is holding its weight, holding its temperature, if it's behaving normally and the temperatures are capable, we have good temperatures outside and then they'll be released.

**David Todd** [01:04:42] And so, just to give kind of an idea of the scale of this, in a typical incident, how many animals and how many species might you be dealing with?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:04:55] It could be anywhere from one to thousands. An average spill would be around 25, 30 animals. And, you know, you could have all 25 or 30 could be brown pelicans, or it could be a vulture and ten gulls, or 15 terns, or a great egret, or a common loon. You can have, it depends on where you are. It depends on the time of year. Inland, of course, you're going to mostly have no birds. You're going to almost always have snakes, turtles, frogs and lizards.

**David Todd** [01:05:43] Gosh, it sounds like Noah's Ark.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:05:47] And sometimes it looks like it.

**David Todd** [01:05:52] And it sounds like one of the steps in treating these animals that come in is to have a veterinarian at least look at the animal, but maybe intervene as well. How do you partner with veterinarians? What's the typical protocol?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:06:08] That depends from state to state. Really nice thing right now is my daughter just graduated from LSU as a veterinarian, so I have one in-house if I need it. And she pretty much grew up with wildlife. That's, she's been around me her whole life, obviously. So, there's always been wildlife here.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:06:29] But I work with a lot of state veterinarians. Sometimes, if it's out in the country, we're going to be working with a veterinarian that deals with dogs and cats and horses. But typically, you know, most of them have really good connections with the universities where they graduated from. And they have a good support group. And funny enough, veterinarians across the country all work together. So, even if one veterinarian doesn't, hasn't ever worked with a particular species, they can reach out to colleagues and help us out.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:07:08] Now, what I really like is to hopefully be near a zoo, because they have really good veterinarians.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:07:18] Usually, from state to state, you know, a veterinarian is licensed in the state in which they work. So, it's pretty hard to take a veterinarian from one state to another state. And they're also, they tend to be very much like, "this happened in my state, so I would like to use veterinarians from the state in which this spill happened." So that's what I do.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:07:47] I have veterinarians that I work with a lot here at my home clinic, and I rely on him a lot. And also, I work in Louisiana a lot. And there's a state wildlife veterinarian there that is just incredible. And I can call him no matter where I am, and he is more than happy to help me or talk to the veterinarians that I'm working with in that state. So, from the veterinarian care side, I've not really ever had a problem.

**David Todd** [01:08:23] Well, so I guess when you're dealing with these animals that have been injured and are stressed, there are some situations that you can't resolve without having some sort of priority system. And I was wondering, how do you make this sort of triage decisions between animals that you will try to save and those that are maybe beyond, you know, being rescued?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:08:55] So, there are some injuries and illnesses that we just know that we can't overcome, like the breaks that we talked about earlier. That's a difficult situation. So, in that case, we, you know, with a wing break, it would most likely be humane euthanasia. If we have, if it's a large spill and there are a lot of animals and we have some T&E species, they would take precedence over all of the other species. So, we work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife a lot, and they also have veterinarians, by the way, and they would help guide us as well.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:09:47] So, we don't operate in a vacuum just because we have permits to take care of these animals. Again, it's sort of like with utilizing the incident command structure. We work with a lot of different partners and don't just make decisions in a vacuum on our own. We talk to everybody and make sure that everybody's in agreement as to how we're going to approach things.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:10:11] So, if we had 15 piping plovers and, I don't know, ten laughing gulls, those piping plovers are going to come first. They will. They will be taken care of before the laughing gulls, if we don't have enough personnel.

**David Todd** [01:10:33] When we left off, we were talking about these difficult triage decisions where you've just got lots of animals needing help and just limited resources or some animals that are just too far gone. How do you deal ... I think you told me that threatened and endangered species will often be ranked highest in ones that need attention. But what if you've got native animals versus non-native, or you've got feral animals that are invasive? You know, you've got some feral hogs. How are those ranked with animals that may be native or desired in some way?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:11:19] So, there are some states. Well, let's take beaver, for instance. There are some states that will ... And keep in mind that our permits are issued by federal and state wildlife trustees. So, there are some states that we would go in and they may say, "Okay, so beaver are destroying our creeks. We don't like the fact that they build dams. We don't want you to rehabilitate those animals. If you get an in any oiled beaver, you have to euthanize them." So, we have to follow the rules and the laws, and if that's what we're told to do, that's what we have to do.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:12:02] Again, we don't, as rehabilitators, we don't make the rules. So, I have not run into that. I almost did on one spill, but we have not had to do that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:12:18] If you look at Louisiana and nutria, I will tell you, you know, there's a bounty on nutria. I think it's \$5 a tail. So, if nutria are caught up in oil spills, we are not allowed to clean them and release them. They have to be euthanized.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:12:42] So, you know, you may run into those kinds of things in spills. And I don't know, maybe in one state they don't, maybe they don't like Canada geese. And there are programs out there where there are some cities that get permits to euthanize Canada geese because they're on a golf course and they don't want them there. So any of those kinds of things, basically everything we do is dictated by the trustees.

**David Todd** [01:13:20] Got you. All right. So, one last question about this treatment of animals that come in. How do you euthanize them? You mentioned that you humanely do it, but I guess there are different methods to use.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:13:36] There are. Sometimes, the easiest way for us is to build a CO2 chamber. Some are chemical euthanasia. If there's a veterinarian there, then they may euthanize them with different drugs. Any, those two forms are approved forms of euthanasia. We don't, hopefully the only thing we have to do is the CO2 chamber, or take them to a veterinarian and have the veterinarian chemically euthanize some.

**David Todd** [01:14:13] All right.

**David Todd** [01:14:15] Well, then I guess there are some animals that are not fit to be released to the wild. They might starve or be quickly eaten. And so, I'm curious how you work with zoos or, you know, educational outfits that might be able to work with an injured animal for educational purposes.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:14:42] So, even in just normal, everyday rehabilitation, which I do, if I'm not on a spill, any animal that comes in for rehabilitation, if it cannot ever be released back into the wild, there are several things that could happen. One, you can donate it to a zoo or to an educational program.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:15:07] For instance, right now I have a red-tailed hawk that I have permitted for educational purposes. But I haven't been home in a while. And she's not getting to work enough. So, I'm looking to donate her now to Armand Bayou Nature Center.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:15:24] So, you can do that.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:15:28] So, if you can't find a zoo, aquarium or some type of nature center that can utilize an animal as an educational animal, then they have to be euthanized. You can't just keep an animal without having a permit to keep it.

**David Todd** [01:15:49] Right? Right. I think I understand that.

**David Todd** [01:15:53] So, it's clear that these animals have meant a lot to you since you were a young child. I was wondering how you think and maybe feel about the place and value of wildlife. And then maybe as a follow-up, would you go so far as to say that animals have a soul?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:16:20] There is one animal that I can absolutely tell you has a soul. So, if you've ever seen my business card, it has a brown pelican on it. It is one of my very, very favorite animals. Because the first major oil spill that I responded to was only a bunch of brown pelicans, not very many adults, almost all chicks, and just very young birds. And if you look at a brown pelican's eye ... you know the song, "Brown Eyed Girl"? Well, every one of them have brown eyes and they have these beautiful brown, dark pupils and it looks like you can see into their soul.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:17:15] That is why that is my favorite bird. It looks like a human eye.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:17:21] And then, there is another animal. I think that if you look at a beaver, if you look in their little beady eyes, again, they look like little human eyes. So, yes, I do believe that there is a soul down in there.

**David Todd** [01:17:48] That's interesting. I think, you know, there are scientists who sort of see them, animals, as key to the way habitats and ecosystems work. And then there are other people who feel like, well, there's just, you know, moral, ethical kind of rules to this. But you see that there's something maybe almost spiritual at play there with some of these animals?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:18:18] Could be. I think so. I feel connected to them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:18:24] And I don't know, if you get a little bit of time and you brought up ecosystems, Google a little bit about beaver and the ecosystems and how they're being used now. They're actually using beaver to help build ponds and totally change the landscape in some areas.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:18:48] But I found this out when we were trying to figure out because we knew we were going to have to hold beaver on a spill for a long time. We were looking at, I mean, we read everything we possibly could to make sure we were doing the right thing by those animals. I've never believed you just get an animal in, you clean it up and you just kind of put it right back out there. I think it has to be put back in the proper way and in the proper place.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:19:19] So, we spent a lot of time looking at that. We spend a lot of time looking at their habitat while we have them in care and then looking at habitat that we're going to put them back into.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:19:33] So yeah, I would look at that. It's a very interesting read if you can find some of that.

**David Todd** [01:19:40] Okay. Well, I've heard they're very good little hydraulic engineers. So ...

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:19:48] They are very industrious.

**David Todd** [01:19:53] Busy as a beaver. Yeah.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:19:54] We put cameras on them and we spent some hours watching them, and how busy they are actually all night long. And, you know, we even put little buckets with rocks in them so that they ... we built them a little step to get out of their pool and they would take those rocks and take them out of the pool and then move them all around.

**David Todd** [01:20:22] That's amazing. I guess that was just another tool, a little material that they could use.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:20:30] Oh yeah. And then one of them, we put, you know, we put the browse, the trees that we cut for them in their pool. One of them liked the trees in the pool, one of them took every single one of them out. And it was just so funny to watch them.

**David Todd** [01:20:47] Well, so that brings up another question. We talked a little bit about animals and their individuality. Do you feel like some of these creatures are distinct from one another? That, you know, there's the beaver that likes having limbs in their pool, and then there's the one who doesn't. Do you see that with the animals that you handle?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:21:10] Oh, yeah. A lot of them. Not typically with snakes, but turtles can be very different. One turtle likes to eat pinkies and another one likes to eat greens. One hates worms. And you get to know which one wants to eat which food and literally put it on their chart. I mean, we really do. We write on the chart, "Don't try to feed worms. Only likes pinkies."

**David Todd** [01:21:43] And pinkies are?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:21:44] Little newborn mice.

**David Todd** [01:21:48] Okay. All right. That's good to know. I didn't know that was their other name.

**David Todd** [01:21:58] So, here's another question. I think that some of the folks who are involved in these spills, of course, are corporations. And they have to operate, you know, under sort of financial rules. And I wonder if some of the sort of wildlife rehabilitation and work is motivated by penalties that might apply in the course of a spill and that, you know, each animal triggers some kind of fine. Is that the case?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:22:32] So, each animal does trigger a certain amount of fine or restitution for impacting it. I don't know what that is for each one. And there are some RPs, Responsible Parties who don't understand. You know, I have had responsible parties ask me, "So tell me, why is it that we do this?" Here's the bottom line. The whole reason that you rehabilitate animals to put them back out into their natural environment is so that they can reproduce and make more animals that are then in the environment. If they cannot, if there is something wrong with that animal that makes it to where it will not be a functioning member of its group, then it really is not right to put it back there.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:23:37] So, I mean, that's just, that's the nature of rehabilitation of animals. That's why we do it. Yes, we want to keep that individual animal alive. But it really is important that that animal goes back into the environment and finds a mate and creates more animals.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:24:02] So, that was kind of my explanation to one of the responsible parties.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:24:10] Sometimes they just, I think, I don't know that I've ever run across a person that said, now they have said, "Boy, you're cost me a lot of money." I have heard that. But, what I say in response to that is, "Yes, sir. Thank you for doing the right thing."

**David Todd** [01:24:33] That's very diplomatic.

**David Todd** [01:24:36] Well, let's talk a little bit about dealing with the people involved in these things. I thought we might start by just how do you recruit workers to do these wildlife responses. It can be hard, stressful, hot, sweaty, long-hours kind of work.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:24:56] It's not easy. It's not easy to recruit the right people. So, we need young, strong people. A lot of us that do this work are getting older. We need people that are okay working sometimes 16-, 18-hour days for long stretches. Sometimes you don't get a day off for a couple of weeks.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:25:27] So, and then finding people who, so I hire contractors. So they don't, it's not a full-time job for them. So, sometimes they don't have a job for a while. They have to be in the right situation because we all need money to survive. We can't buy gas for our cars. We can't buy food if we don't make money.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:25:54] So, what I've taught them all is, you know, while you're working, while you're making this money, then you need to make sure you keep some of that aside in your bank for those times when you're not working. Because when they are working, the responsible party is paying for their lodging. It's paying for their food, paying for their time. So, you take advantage of that and don't go out and spend a lot of your money.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:26:26] You know, I started this when I had young children, but my husband works from home, so I was able to go and be an oil spill responder because he stepped up and he just took over everything. That's not the case in a lot of families.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:26:43] So, a lot of the folks that do this kind of work are retired. Well, one of my responders is retired DNR, Department of Natural Resources, in Ohio. So, he already has a pension that comes in. And so, he helps. When I need help, I have another one that's retired from Texas Parks and Wildlife. Well, actually, I have several retired from Texas Parks and Wildlife, so they're already wildlife biologist that understand the animals in the state of Texas. So they're huge help.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:27:21] It may be somebody that has a vet tech certificate. It may be a retired veterinarian.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:27:31] It may be somebody that grew up on a farm and knows how to handle large animals because, yes, sometimes we have cattle and horses and cats and dogs in spills. It's not always just wildlife.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:27:45] So, I look for all of those different backgrounds and people, and I make them a part of my team. I can train them.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:27:55] I get a lot of rehabilitators that don't have full-time jobs. So, that group of people is another good place, a pool of personnel.

**David Todd** [01:28:08] Do you get a sense of what drives the folks that you work with? I mean, they're getting paid, but I imagine that it's more than a job for many.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:28:20] They all love animals. They all love animals. You can't not, because the work is hard. It's dirty. It's long hours. It's exhausting, sometimes very stressful. So if you don't ... I get a lot of people that say, "Oh, I love your job. I think it's so romantic." And I set them straight pretty quickly. "It's not romantic. It's my passion. And you can tell it's my passion, but it's hard work."

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:29:02] So yeah, I have invited a few people who have said, "Oh, that's going to be fabulous." And then they get there and they're like, "How do you do this all the time?" So yeah, it is. You really have to have a love for animals.

**David Todd** [01:29:20] Well. And these folks that you work with are, you know, essential to you. And I'm sure many of them are your friends. And I was curious, how do you protect

them? I mean, some of these chemicals are probably pretty toxic. What are some of the precautions you take to make sure that they're safe?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:29:42] So, there's always a safety officer that's part of the command structure, and they perform safety audits at the rehab center. They make sure that we're wearing the appropriate PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], or engineering out things. Maybe we have, we set up a really good air exchange, and then we may have someone there with a monitor to make sure that we're not breathing something we're not supposed to be breathing. So all the proper safety precautions are put in place because we want everybody to go whole.

**David Todd** [01:30:24] Well, so one other question about the folks that you work with. Do you see much in the way of burnout where it just becomes too taxing, too stressful, too tiring? And folks say, "You know, I love it. But, I can't do it."

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:30:43] I have seen it. I've seen that. But we have instituted a new policy where I mean, in the old days, I'll just put it that way. In the old days, when you got on the spill, you stayed there till it was done. Well, that's not what we do anymore. And I, I've had the approval to say this, but the last bill that we were on, the TC Energy spill in Kansas. They have a policy. TC Energy has a policy that day 14, you take a day off. And you do whatever you want to do on day 14, but you don't work past 13 days.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:31:23] And so we now have, Wildlife Response Services, has adopted that policy. I will tell you that my team complained a lot and said, "We're responders. We don't want to take a day off. We're supposed to be here taking care of animals. We don't want to take a day off."

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:31:40] Well, after the first time of getting a day off, then they started counting. "Is it almost my 14th day?" So, now we have all decided that day 14 is a really good day to take a break. So it's not that everybody takes day 14 off. We have to stagger. Obviously, we only give one person. That first one's a little tricky. Somebody may have to take day 12. Somebody is 13, 14. So, and then we get then we get on a rotation where each person only works those 13 days.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:32:19] But yeah, when they started, I said, "You know, don't just sleep late, although you should sleep late. Go see a movie, go to a museum, go do something to make your brain change gears for just a day."

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:32:37] So, yes, I'm trying to now get rid of that burnout.

**David Todd** [01:32:43] No, that seems, that seems really wise. So you can come back and do this another day.

**David Todd** [01:32:49] So, now I understand that you have served as a teacher, a substitute teacher, at the Clear Creek ISD for a number of years, and I was wondering if you ever import some of these experiences from your wildlife rehabilitation work into the lessons that you share with students.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:33:10] Oh yeah. In fact, I had educational animals, so I would take the animals in and we would have lessons on, on those birds. It might be draw this bird, count the number of scales on this snake, those sorts of things. And our school district has what's



called the Living Materials Center or the LMC, and it is a giant room full of animals, be it snakes, guinea pigs, frogs, all kinds of snakes, turtles, chinchillas, mice, gerbils, you name it, they have it in there.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:33:46] And the teachers can check those animals out and take them into their classrooms. So, that really was my favorite substitute teacher job. That's mostly where I substituted - in that animal lab.

**David Todd** [01:34:03] And what sort of response did you see from the children?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:34:08] Oh, they'd light up. And you can use an animal for almost anything. I've also taught classes at U of H - Clear Lake. And one of my favorite classes that I made up was I would have a child pick an animal, any animal that they wanted to have as a pet. And then they had to research that animal and see how long it lived and how they'd take care of it, and everything that you needed to know about that animal. And then they had ... I don't know if you had children and ever had to build a diorama ... then they had to build a diorama of the animal's cage. So that was my very favorite class.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:34:54] And then the other one was an animal tracking class where we literally would go out to the forest and look for scat or animal poop so we could tell what kind of animals had been in the area.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:35:10] So, I kind of built my life around all kinds of animal stuff.

**David Todd** [01:35:17] That's wonderful. And nice that you share it.

**David Todd** [01:35:22] Is there any sort of general educational outreach that you've done about wildlife and rehabilitation? I mean, outside of school or U of H.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:35:35] No. No, I guess that's about it with the schools. And we do talk to, we take our educational birds and talk to garden clubs and Boy Scout groups. And I have a boys come over and I have projects that they can undertake to get their Eagle Scout and then the girls for their Gold Award, the Golden Award. So, I've had a lot of that kind of thing here. And then around here we also have a group called Sea Scouts, so off of Galveston. So, I've had them come and build pens or repair cages or build perches, things like that.

**David Todd** [01:36:31] Great.

**David Todd** [01:36:34] Well, we've covered a lot of ground. Thank you.

**David Todd** [01:36:37] Is there anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:36:43] I just. I don't have time for it anymore, but I just, I spent a lot of time on the younger generation in trying to help them develop a love of their natural environment and the animals and the habitats that are in it. Because, you know, we all get older. We all eventually stop doing the things that we do, and we hope that we leave behind some kind of legacy and love with other people, younger people, to continue what we really cared about.

**Rhonda Murgatroyd** [01:37:17] So, I just, I think that if everybody does a little bit about that type of activity, then the world would be a better place.

**David Todd** [01:37:30] Well said. Well, you're certainly pulling your load, doing your part.

**David Todd** [01:37:37] So, thank you very much.