

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Sharon Schmalz

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:01] Well. Good morning.

David Todd [00:00:02] I am David Todd, and I have the great privilege of being here with Sharon Schmalz. And with her permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group called 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 based at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:00:30] And she would have all rights to use the recording as she sees fit.

David Todd [00:00:34] And I wanted to make sure before we went any further, that that's okay with Ms Schmalz.

Sharon Schmalz [00:00:39] That's fine with me.

David Todd [00:00:41] Okay. Well, good. Good. I'm so glad.

David Todd [00:00:43] Well, let's get started. It is Thursday, January 11th, 2024. It's about, 9:40 a.m. Central Time and 10:40, East Coast Time.

David Todd [00:00:58] My name is David Todd, as I said. I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am based in Austin, and we are conducting a remote interview with Sharon Schmaltz, who works in the Houston area.

David Todd [00:01:13] Ms Schmalz is the executive director of the Wildlife Center of Texas, which was formed in 1993 as, originally, Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education, and then became a subsidiary of the Houston SPCA in 2007 and was renamed as the Wildlife Center of Texas in 2011.

David Todd [00:01:34] The Center serves the Houston area and nine surrounding counties, and cares for, roughly 10,000 wild animals each year. And actually, I think, took in a record 14,000 creatures last year. So, certainly a big significant operation there.

Sharon Schmalz [00:01:51] Ms Schmalz carries HAZWOPER and ICS certifications and has a TWIC card for dealing with oil-contaminated wildlife.

David Todd [00:01:59] She has helped develop best practices for migratory bird care during oil spill response, has coordinated oiled wildlife response workshops for the General Land Office here in Texas.

David Todd [00:02:11] She also works with the Texas A&M Veterinary School and serves on the advisory council of the Texas State Animal Resources Team, which coordinates preparations for animals that might be affected by disasters in the state.

David Todd [00:02:24] And, and, in the course of all the other things she does, she does educational outreach to many kids and adults.

David Todd [00:02:32] Today we'll be talking about Ms Schmalz' life and career to-date, and especially focus on what she remembers and has learned about the history of the care of injured, sick and orphaned wildlife in Texas.

David Todd [00:02:47] So, with that long-winded introduction, thank you again for doing this.

Sharon Schmalz [00:02:53] Good.

David Todd [00:02:55] Good, good.

David Todd [00:02:55] Well, let's start by talking about your early years. And I was hoping that you might be able to tell us about your childhood and if there's any sort of people or events then that might have gotten you interested in animals and in wildlife rehabilitation.

Sharon Schmalz [00:03:15] Great. Well, I actually grew up in the Rio Grande Valley, in Harlingen, Texas. So, you know, this was many years ago - growing up in the '60s.

Sharon Schmalz [00:03:25] And one of the biggest things I remember are the horned lizards that were just everywhere. And I think I was always intrigued by them. And, we also had lots of dogs and cats that my dad would bring home. He'd find, you know, orphaned, injured animals, not wildlife, but, like dogs and cats that he would bring home.

Sharon Schmalz [00:03:48] But I think, you know, I probably, if I could go back, I would like to actually spend more time with the wildlife down in the Valley because, I mean, it's teeming with it, or at least it was back in those days. Even in subdivisions, you know, the horned lizard was just there everywhere. And kids picked them up. I picked them up. We used to, you know, keep them for a while and let them go. And so I think maybe that was kind of the first trigger that I had of thinking about wildlife.

Sharon Schmalz [00:04:20] Because, you know, as I grew and went to, you know, school and stuff, I was always kind of pushed more into engineering and math and sciences, and really not a whole lot of exposure to animals while I was in school, elementary school, and even through, through high school.

Sharon Schmalz [00:04:44] So, it's, you know, it's looking back, I wish I'd thought about it more at that point.

Sharon Schmalz [00:04:50] So, when I did graduate from high school in Harlingen, I actually kind of thought about veterinary school, but didn't really know a lot about it. And once again, I was pushed more toward engineering.

Sharon Schmalz [00:05:03] So, I ended up going to Texas A&M University. And, there weren't as many women there at that time. This was in the '70s. And so, you know, it was a different campus than it is today.

Sharon Schmalz [00:05:16] And, I actually started as a physics major, and then I thought, "What's this about physics?" And so, then somebody said, "Well, how about computers?" And this was kind of like, you know, the upcoming thing with computers, I'm like, "Okay". I didn't know anything about it, but I thought, "Okay, I'll try computers and math". So, I actually got a double degree in computer science and mathematics.

Sharon Schmalz [00:05:41] And so, that kind of drew me back away from animals again, even though I always kind of wondered about the School of Veterinary Medicine, you know, but, that was kind of, probably, if there was a person, it would probably have been my dad because he would find stray dogs and cats and bring them home.

Sharon Schmalz [00:06:01] But I think some of it was just the influence of living in the Valley. You know, at the time, the Rio Grande Valley, I didn't know that much about all the bird life and stuff there. I don't remember the bird life as much as I do, you know, the lizards and frogs and stuff like that. But, you know, now it's like, well, I'd love to go back there and see those again.

David Todd [00:06:25] Absolutely. Well, so I think you keyed on your dad as being maybe an influence there. And I was hoping that you might tell us: so, he's bringing, um, the stray dogs and cats, maybe injured, maybe just, abandoned. What would he do with them? Or what would your family do with them once they were in your home?

Sharon Schmalz [00:06:48] Well, we really didn't keep too many. My mother was from New York City, so this was all like, "Hmmm?", you know, to her. She didn't have that kind of influence in her life growing up.

Sharon Schmalz [00:06:58] And so, um, I know he would just... We only ever had maybe, I think I remember having two dogs at a time. I mean, we really didn't, we weren't a collecting point, which is a good thing, but, I think, you know, he would find places for them, homes for them. Or, I don't, you know, I don't remember if he worked with, getting things to an animal control facility there or anything like that. But, you know, we never had, like I said, I can't remember more than, like two dogs, two cats at a time.

David Todd [00:07:32] Okay. Well, and, in those early years, were there any, um, kids that you ran around with or classmates perhaps, that had an interest in animals that you might have been exposed to or spent time with?

Sharon Schmalz [00:07:48] Not really. Not that I can remember. I remember I grew up as a tomboy. There was lots of boys in our neighborhood. I don't really remember that, except for, like, you know, back to the horned lizards. I, you know, those were a big deal in my life at that time.

Sharon Schmalz [00:08:06] And many years later, when we went across the border into Mexico, when I was older and probably in college, I remember a child trying to sell me a horned lizard, and it just upset me so much. I'm like, "No, you can't sell them. It's, you know, it's against the law." And they're, you know, by this point, they're all almost, you know, becoming endangered. And I'm like, "No, you need to take it back."

Sharon Schmalz [00:08:29] And it was just like so upsetting to me. They always have a place in my heart, I think.

David Todd [00:08:38] Well, that's interesting. It's just intriguing to me. Clearly it resonated with you that, that that was the wrong thing to do, and it was upsetting.

Sharon Schmalz [00:08:46] Right.

David Todd [00:08:47] Well, so aside from, people that might have influenced you or lizards that you came across, were there any books or TV shows or movies or other things that are sort of in the popular culture and media that might have been encouraging this interest that was, I guess, slowly developing?

Sharon Schmalz [00:09:07] You know, no, I don't think so. I think it was just one of those things that just always I had in me, you know, just something that always intrigued me and didn't really, you know, especially as a young child, didn't understand how, you know, all that fit in the whole scheme of life. Right?

Sharon Schmalz [00:09:27] And so, I think I just I didn't, not until I got into probably college where I really started paying more attention, you know, taking biology classes and stuff, that I really started becoming even more interested in wildlife in particular. I think I always cared about animals, but probably more with wildlife.

Sharon Schmalz [00:09:50] And then, if I'm jumping too fast. But, after I got married and my husband was a great birder, he loved birds, and he, he always would go birding - the Christmas bird counts - which I would go too, is when I really started kind of really, really getting into more, you know, birdwatching and stuff like that.

Sharon Schmalz [00:10:13] So, and then the, I guess the next thing that happened, there was a storm and, well, actually, I was still doing computer science work at that time after I had my children. I have two children. And I started just doing consulting and working out of my home and doing, computer work, more as a consulting basis, not full-time.

Sharon Schmalz [00:10:35] And I think one of the things that really triggered it was, there was a storm, and we had a purple martin house up in our yard. And there were two little, you know, English sparrows, non-native sparrows. They were blown out of that purple martin house. And we brought them in because it was storming and everything and started kind of, you know, just doing some research about, like, what are we going to feed them? You know, what do we do with this? And then finding out that some animals were protected by state and federal government, and some animals weren't, and the English sparrow was one that was not.

Sharon Schmalz [00:11:13] And so we started figuring out what are we going to do, how are we going to feed them. And so, we went through that whole process of raising these little sparrows.

Sharon Schmalz [00:11:24] And then, at that time there was a small group in the Houston area that had started, were just starting to kind of get together and talk about wildlife rehabilitation and stuff. And I guess by this point we were in the 19, where would that have

been, probably early 1980s, and then found out that, you know, you do have to have a permit from state and federal government if you want to take care of injured or orphaned wildlife.

Sharon Schmalz [00:11:52] And so, we started going to some meetings, trying to figure some stuff out, talked with my veterinarian - would he be in support of helping with wildlife? And he's like, "Well, I don't know a whole lot about it, but, you know, I would love to work with you. And I bet we can figure a lot of it out." And so I started working with my veterinarian at that time.

Sharon Schmalz [00:12:14] And, and then it's just, you know, how non-profits can do: it kind of took over my life. And I started finding I had less and less time to do consulting work, so it was all volunteer work at that time. Well, I guess that was right before we started Wildlife Rehab and Education, or ten years before that. So we started, you know, working, working with all kinds of wildlife that people would find. And it was amazing how, you know, they could find their phone number and bring animals to us. So that was kind of interesting.

David Todd [00:12:51] So, this is starting in the early 1980s, I guess around '83, if I'm not mistaken?

Sharon Schmalz [00:12:58] Yes. Probably, about '83. Yeah.

David Todd [00:12:59] Okay. And are you doing this just out of your house or had you leased a place that you could share? How did that work?

Sharon Schmalz [00:13:06] No, no, we just did it out of our homes, and we set up as, like, a network. As it grew, we found more and more people that were interested and started having training classes. We'd actually get together and meet and have training classes about handling, you know, injured and orphaned wildlife. So, and it just started growing and there were more and more people that were interested.

David Todd [00:13:33] And this is in the Houston area. Is that right?

Sharon Schmalz [00:13:35] Yes. This was in the Houston area. I actually lived in League City.

David Todd [00:13:41] Okay. And so, people would start bringing you animals, and I'm curious, you know, maybe you can give us some examples of what kind of animals and what would typically bring these animals to your door.

Sharon Schmalz [00:13:56] Well, all kinds of things. You know, there would be, you know, just your common species like, Inca doves, mourning doves, mockingbirds, you know, things like that. And sometimes it was because they were injured. They flew into a window. They were caught by a cat. They were hit by a car. Just different ways that people would find them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:14:20] And, and then it started growing where we were getting larger animals like hawks and owls and stuff. So, we really worked a lot then at that point with, like, the Houston Zoo and some of the, the other places. So, yeah, that really made it grow faster because there were, you know, more and more, the need was there for somebody to take care of them. So we did.

Sharon Schmalz [00:14:49] And that's why we would continue having monthly meetings where we would get together and keep working with the other animals.

Sharon Schmalz [00:14:58] And I think, I think I always wanted it to be more. It was one of those things that I wanted to see a facility eventually. And, so did our board back in that time - wanted to try and find a place where people could bring animals, where we could have veterinarians that would be interested in helping.

Sharon Schmalz [00:15:18] But it was, it's difficult. It's very difficult for wildlife groups to find places like that. It's expensive, trying to find the funding for it and, you know, but I think it was always my dream because I wanted it to be more scientific. I wanted it to be, you know, so that we could give more help to more animals, never wanting to turn away an animal that did need that help.

David Todd [00:15:45] Well, and I think it's so interesting that a lot of this seems you know, sort of done by individuals, done by volunteers, done out of their homes. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about some of the people that were in your network and what drew them to this kind of work?

Sharon Schmalz [00:16:07] Well, you know, there was a lot. I lived down in the NASA area, so there were a lot of other people that worked with NASA that were interested. Some were just people that were home during the day, maybe like myself. I was raising my children at the time, and trying to do work on the side basically. And so, you know, I think it just, there were other people like that were interested, fascinated by wildlife, wanting, you know, to provide assistance.

David Todd [00:16:39] Well, and it sounds like you work with that vets and then with the Houston Zoo. And what sort of lessons, sessions, might they offer to help you understand, you know, how to get them stabilized, how to get them fed, you know, how to mend broken bones or..

Sharon Schmalz [00:17:00] Right.

David Todd [00:17:00] You know, clean oil or contaminants off, or whatever might be the problem.

Sharon Schmalz [00:17:04] Yeah. Well, we've had a lot of people, come into our training sessions. You know, I would invite veterinarians to come. Sometimes it would be on a one-on-one basis. Like one of us would take an animal to a veterinarian. And then in our monthly meetings, we would talk about, you know, this is a way that, you know, triage works. Here's how we do this. Here's how we stabilize an animal when it comes in, how to give fluids.

Sharon Schmalz [00:17:29] And of course, you know, the difficult thing with wildlife is there's so many different species, and every species requires some little different thing. And so, trying to learn that stuff, spread the word, share the knowledge that some of us were learning with other people that were interested in doing it. Because, you know, one of my things is if you're going to do it, you need to do it right, and you need to be trained and you need to have the proper permits and, you know, and that kind of stuff.

David Todd [00:17:59] Well, so this, um, gives me a, a little bit of a view of those early years, I guess before you formalized things, and I thought maybe we could move forward to, 1993, when you start Wildlife Rehab and Education. So what influenced you to do that? And how did you go about it?

Sharon Schmalz [00:18:24] Well, you know, the funding for it - turning it into a nonprofit, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, so that we could get support from the people who, like, if somebody found an animal and brought them to us, they could actually make a donation and it would be tax-deductible. So, it was kind of that next step of getting in there and, and, making it as a non-profit, keeping records. We still had no paid employees. And we were all doing this as volunteers. And, that helped us kind of start growing.

Sharon Schmalz [00:18:59] And, you know, and then we talked more and more about, well, how can we have a facility? How can we have a place? But we talked about that for a long time. It was, you know, it's very hard to do that kind of thing, especially with wildlife. I think it's a little different with domestic animals. There's more funding for domestic animals, obviously, for people, you know, non-profits, which is important too. Um, but it's just, wildlife is a little bit further down. I don't, I always say this because I really think a lot of people don't realize that wildlife feels pain, too. And, you know, animals that are out there that are injured, orphaned, um, you know, they've got a nervous system. They feel pain just as we do.

Sharon Schmalz [00:19:44] And I think that was always my driving force was to be able to provide help to those animals that needed it. And so, that I think that kept us going. I think most of the people who were founding members, you know, just, "Yeah, we need to be able to take in more. We need to be able to provide more relief for these animals." And so, that was that was one of the things I've always felt very strongly about that, that we needed to help them.

David Todd [00:20:14] Yes. Well, that's really interesting. So, some of this concern you think was based on sort of a humanitarian kind of impulse, about, you know, seeing that these animals were feeling pain, and you're trying to assuage the pain and make them feel better. I mean, is that right?

Sharon Schmalz [00:20:38] Yeah, I think so. I mean, that was one of the driving forces.

Sharon Schmalz [00:20:42] And then, I think the other part of that is it's not like one day you get an endangered species and you're like, "Oh, okay, this is what we do with it, or an oiled animal." It's kind of, I always say it was our practice for things that, you know, maybe are very important in that we get back out into the wild, and including because there's a lot of species that we saw during the oil spill response that, you know, we want to get them back into the wild, but we need to know, like, what is the best fluids to give them, and what is the best thing to do for this and that. What kind of surgeries are more successful? You sure don't want to get a bald eagle in and have never put a pin in the wing of any bird?

Sharon Schmalz [00:21:25] So, you know, there are some things that are more successful than others. And so, you know a lot of that too - we'd practice that, we'd learn that. We figured out what were the best things to do for just general wildlife that would come into care.

David Todd [00:21:42] Okay. Well, you know, sort of continuing at the 30,000-foot level, I'm trying to understand the track of these organizations, you know, from this sort of nascent phase where it's this kind of informal network and then you become, Wildlife Rehab and Education and then, my understanding is in 2007, you become a subsidiary of the Houston SPCA. And I think that's really interesting because just like you were saying, SPCA, traditionally pets, you know, your group, traditionally wildlife. How did that kind of marriage happen?

Sharon Schmalz [00:22:21] Well, it was a great thing that happened. And I think the driving force was Patti Mercer, who was president of the Houston SPCA and the board of directors at that time of the Houston SPCA. And they, you know, they knew we take care of dogs and cats. We take care of farm animals. You know, we take care of all these other kind of animals. But what are we, is there something we're missing here? And Patti Mercer said, "Yeah, you know, we need to help with wildlife."

Sharon Schmalz [00:22:52] And at that point, animals would, I mean, people would bring animals to the Houston SPCA, but, and then we would pick them up. I would pick them up from, or the rescue driver with the Houston SPCA would bring them to me. And so, you know, Patti already kind of knew we had an organization going, that we were a non-profit. And so, after the board, the interest from the Houston SPCA board, and the, you know, Patti Mercer's interest, we actually met for coffee one day, and over coffee decided that's a great idea, because, you know, it's hard for wildlife to have centers and make it on their own.

Sharon Schmalz [00:23:31] And that's kind of when we decided, you know, this is what we need to do for wildlife because it is a big deal. I mean, it's just amazing the number of animals out there, um, especially with all the building and construction and habitat loss going on in the Houston area. It's important.

Sharon Schmalz [00:23:49] And so I was totally excited about this. I mean, that was like what we'd always wished for, was a place where we could have veterinarians, where the public could bring animals to us. We wouldn't be taking them in in our homes, you know, at midnight people showing up at your door. So it was it was a great, great, partnership that we took on there.

Sharon Schmalz [00:24:12] And, so we became the Houston SPCA Wildlife Center of Texas. Well, I guess we didn't actually change our name till 2011. We still had the name Wildlife Rehab and Education. And so then, we did later on change our name to the Houston SPCA Wildlife Center of Texas. So, but it's been a great relationship. Could not do this, the number of animals that we do now, without the help of that organization. I mean, we are part of that organization now. We are like a program of the Houston SPCA. So, I think that's pretty cool. I think it's, you know, it's pretty interesting.

Sharon Schmalz [00:24:50] And now we're, it's become kind of a role model for other, other organizations to look at. Because I think at first it was like, they're so different. How can they be together? They absolutely can be together. And we've never been, I can't think of any time we were ever, you know, squelched on something we wanted to do for wildlife. They were always there for the support, and so, you know, not only financially, but also just the theory of wildlife and what we wanted to do. So it's been a great relationship and it really it makes me happy. And I also feel like I can retire.

David Todd [00:25:31] Yeah. Well, it seems like it must have given you a lot of stability to have that partnership with the SPCA, which is such an old and large group with a big base. Is that right?

Sharon Schmalz [00:25:41] Yes, 100 years. They've been around for 100 years. This year will be 100 years that the Houston SPCA has been around.

Sharon Schmalz [00:25:49] So, yeah, it was like it really did give us some stability and ways to grow, and grow. We actually grew a lot, more so than I ever thought. I think the first year, in 2008, we took in about 6500 animals, which is still a lot, you know, in your first year, um, because we had a staff of three people, we had lots of volunteers. And, you know, we couldn't have done it without the volunteers, and we still can't do it without the volunteers that we have. And so, yeah, so then it grew to, to this year, 2023, where we took in over 14,000 animals. I mean, that's amazing that we've been able to do that, and never turning away a wild animal in need.

Sharon Schmalz [00:26:36] We're always there to help and, you know, and that's what we want to do. We want to keep being, you know, we want to continue to be able to do that, to always provide help.

Sharon Schmalz [00:26:46] And, you know, a lot of people think of, "Well, the animals...", but there's a lot of help we do for the people, too, because it's different when you find that little baby bird in your hand and you're like, "What do I do with this thing?", you know, "It's alive and I don't want to hurt it."

Sharon Schmalz [00:27:01] And so, and children that find animals. So, we spent a lot of time on the phone, a lot of education on the phone about, "Okay, now, that one, the mom's probably around, you need to put it back in the nest or put it in a hanging basket, see if mom comes back." So we do a lot of that too.

Sharon Schmalz [00:27:20] We sure don't want to take them all, and we don't want to take them if they don't need help. So, we really spent a lot of time talking about don't kidnap the wildlife. you know, make sure the wildlife does need assistance. And so, that does take a lot of time. The phone calls take a lot because we want to make sure we're doing the best thing for the wildlife, because their mother is better for them than we are. So, you know, whenever, especially baby birds, is whenever we can leave them for mom, that's what we definitely encourage them to do.

Sharon Schmalz [00:27:52] And even mammals, I mean, you know, squirrels that people find in their yard. "I'll bet mom's around and she's making another nest. So give her some time. She may come back and, you know, pick them up and move them."

Sharon Schmalz [00:28:03] And so that is, you know, another very important part of what we do.

Sharon Schmalz [00:28:07] You know, so many thankful kids come in with mom and dad and, you know, even mom and dad sometimes are like, "I didn't know this was so involved. And, oh, I'm so glad you're here." And the kids are just beaming, because, you know, we brag on them that they cared enough to, you know, talk mom and dad into driving them into Houston and bringing the animal to us.

Sharon Schmalz [00:28:28] So, I think that's an important part of it, is helping the people too, not only the animal.

David Todd [00:28:35] That's great, because I imagine, you know, this is probably a big moment in a, especially in a small child's life, when you find this distressed animal, and you know, you feel like you could be a big, a big parent yourself and try to help out, with the help from, you know, the Wildlife Center of Texas.

Sharon Schmalz [00:28:55] Right.

David Todd [00:28:56] Well, so you touched on this earlier about what the sort of typical reasons for animals coming in. I think you mentioned the cat attacks and window collisions or car wrecks. Are there other causes that you see as sort of a common reason bringing animals into the wildlife center?

Sharon Schmalz [00:29:18] Yes, those are probably some of the bigger ones. You know, babies that have fallen out a nest would be another one, you know, car strikes a lot. And just during migration, some of the animals coming in during migration, when they end up migrating through here, and then it's, we're in the middle of a drought, so there's not enough water for them. You know, weather will have things to do.

Sharon Schmalz [00:29:41] And a lot of times people say, well, you know, do you feel like you're interfering with Mother Nature? And, because that hurricane was going to happen anyway or that drought was going to happen. But, you know, we have changed the environment so much. You know, we put in our parking lots and our subdivisions and our houses, and so it's not the same as it used to be, that you can truly say Mother Nature had something to do with that.

Sharon Schmalz [00:30:08] And so, I think that's one of the things that we try to look at: that, you know, we need to help. This year, with all the droughts and the heat, the extreme heat this year really helped probably kick those numbers up over 14,000, because there were so many animals that came in just so dehydrated.

Sharon Schmalz [00:30:26] But that's not something we want to just leave on the ground because it was Mother Nature, because, you know, like, once again, we have changed the environment. We've changed, we've changed local environments. We changed it globally.

Sharon Schmalz [00:30:40] So, it's something that, you know, we need to be able to help and put back, to get it back, to get them back to where they go, because they were important in the whole scheme of everything in the world.

Sharon Schmalz [00:30:53] And, but I'm trying to think, you know, probably like we briefly talked about like all kinds of weather things that can occur, like hurricanes and different storms and droughts can cause this.

Sharon Schmalz [00:31:06] Illegal gunshot wounds, people shooting. This year, in fact, over this last probably three or four weeks, we've had several calls on eagles that have either gunshot wounds or some kind of injury, hit by cars. So, you know, that does happen, too.

Sharon Schmalz [00:31:26] And we do collect evidence for Fish and Wildlife because we all take X-rays and you can see the pellets within them. We can remove pellets. They can send it to their lab. And law enforcement can get involved.

Sharon Schmalz [00:31:39] So, you know, that we see too - even just people in their backyard shooting at birds, which is illegal because almost all wildlife is protected by state and federal government. Almost all birds are protected by U.S. Fish and Wildlife. And Texas Parks and Wildlife protects them and mammals, too, and reptiles.

Sharon Schmalz [00:32:00] And I think people don't, a lot of times, people don't realize that. And they're like, "Oh, I didn't know I was supposed to have this."

Sharon Schmalz [00:32:06] So, you know, once again, that's part of that education that we do on the phone is trying to tell people, you know, you can't keep that as a pet. You need to get it to us right away so that we can get it on the proper diet and get it back in the wild where it belongs.

David Todd [00:32:22] So you've sort of teased me a little bit with the names of some of these animals that you've seen. It seems like a really big variety. I think earlier you talked about mockingbirds and English sparrows, and then you just mentioned eagles. What are the most common animals that you might see coming in? And what are some of the more unusual, rare animals that you might see?

Sharon Schmalz [00:32:46] We see a lot of songbirds, especially in Houston. We're in the migratory bird route. And so, a lot of songbirds and raptors, birds of prey, that migrate too. So, it's, I think we've seen over 300 and, I'll get the exact number here - 385 different species since we've been at the Wildlife Center.

Sharon Schmalz [00:33:09] So, some of them were small birds, hummingbirds, all the way up to brown pelicans, white pelicans, some of the larger birds like that. And then in between - the birds of prey, our hawks or our owls, which are still, you know, people see in neighborhoods and they're so fascinated by it. But there's lots of great horned owls, screech owls, which are smaller owls, like about a, you know, six-inch owl. So, they do very well in neighborhoods. They eat tons of cockroaches. Yay! So, they do help control that population. so they're very common in neighborhoods.

Sharon Schmalz [00:33:47] Barred owls, barn owls, a lot of the hawks that we see are the red-shouldered hawks. Red-tailed hawks, Cooper's hawks, I mean, just any kind of hawk you can think of almost come through, the Houston area.

Sharon Schmalz [00:34:03] And, the owls, too, we get, like, I think all the species of owls. Well, not all of them, but there's a lot of species of owls that we have too in our area.

Sharon Schmalz [00:34:13] So, and then, of course, there's the mammals. We do see, you know, everything from little bitty squirrels up to opossums. One of the big animals that we see a lot of are opossums. They're very common in the Houston area. And they too love cockroaches.

Sharon Schmalz [00:34:32] And so, they're another one that we try to, we talk to people and they're like, "Oh, my gosh, there's this ugly animal out there, this opossum, we don't want it here." And we're like, "Oh, you should know all the animals that they eat, like cockroaches and rats and mice. And so they're natural predators. They're natural things that are trying to take care of things you don't want there - you don't want those things there. They eat poisonous snakes."

Sharon Schmalz [00:34:58] So, we do a lot of education on opossums. And, you know, they only live like, three or four years. They're very short-lived, but they can have up to thirteen babies. So, we receive a lot of our possums at the Wildlife Center every year.

Sharon Schmalz [00:35:13] So, and they're one of my favorites. They're so unique and so interesting. You know, the only marsupial that we have in North America. They're like a kangaroo. And they have a pouch that they carry their babies in. And, it's just amazing to see them come in. And what an interesting thing, you know, being a marsupial.

Sharon Schmalz [00:35:34] And so it's great to teach kids about them. A lot of times we'll have an educational opossum that can't go back out to the wild, and we'll take him to schools and stuff.

David Todd [00:35:45] Well, and so this wide variety of wildlife that's coming in - what is the most sort of typical kind of care that you can provide? I think you mentioned some of the problems, you know, whether it's dehydration or collision with an automobile or maybe getting nipped by a cat. What do you typically try to do on behalf of these animals?

Sharon Schmalz [00:36:15] Well, the first thing we do is when they come in, we do triage. Each one gets checked out, trying to figure out exactly what's happened. A lot of them are covered in parasites, like fleas. We'll de-flea them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:36:28] And just trying to find out, you know, what did happen. Sometimes, you know, they can't talk to us. They can't tell us. So, sometimes, just by the story of the finder, of the person who brings them in, kind of keys us in on what might be going on.

Sharon Schmalz [00:36:43] But they'll get a triage, just like people do. You know, we look at, like, are their eyes reacting to the light? Oh, one eye is, one eye isn't, you know? So, then you start thinking of head trauma. We look into the ears for blood - hit by a car.

Sharon Schmalz [00:36:59] And so, we give them some pain medication, because they are stressed, I mean, even more so than a domestic animal because these are animals that aren't used to people holding them, you know, and we're holding them and we're checking them out, trying to find out what's wrong.

Sharon Schmalz [00:37:15] And then they're fighting pain because, you know, some of these hit by cars and cat bites, are very painful to them. So, we try to give them that to calm them down, relieve their pain a little bit, because stress alone can cause other problems that can kill them, too. So, we have to be very careful.

Sharon Schmalz [00:37:35] Our staff is very quick. We can do a triage pretty quickly with them in an exam and get them on some medications. We just, we had a hawk, a red-tailed hawk that was in the front-end radiator of a car for a week. And the guy, the only reason he thinks it'd been a week is when he was driving (I think he was driving up to College Station), and he saw this hawk go across the road. And he never did really see it, you know, continue on. But he's going 70 miles an hour. And so he thinks that that's when it got, he must have hit it.

Sharon Schmalz [00:38:10] And it was up inside the radiator. And so, he drove. And I don't know how often he'd driven the car, but he said, "Who looks in the front of their car to see that there's a, you know?" And so, somebody happened to walk up in the parking lot and saw movement. And that's when they found it.

Sharon Schmalz [00:38:26] And so they got it out of the car. And he had a broken wing. He was dehydrated and full of parasites. And that bird is going to be released in the next couple

weeks. So that's a, you know, "Yay!". That was one of those, you know, we were able to get back into the wild.

Sharon Schmalz [00:38:44] But, you know, there's stories like that that, you know, just odd things. But, like, who would have thought, to check out your radiator area, right, for an animal in there? So we do see, you know, unusual things like that that'll happen sometimes.

Sharon Schmalz [00:39:00] We have had animals - ringtail cats - that aren't really that common in the Houston area. But somebody moved a, it was like a trailer, and they moved it from West Texas into the Houston area. And somebody noticed when they saw this tail hanging out of this trailer. And sure enough, there had been some ringtail cats that had nested it up in this trailer while it was sitting stable in West Texas.

Sharon Schmalz [00:39:28] So, we were able to get them out, and get them hydrated, and get them taken care of, and get them back and release them back where they belong, back into the West Texas area.

Sharon Schmalz [00:39:39] And we had a screech owl that was hit apparently by a train. And, the train was, they noticed it, it had popped up and it was sitting kind of in the front where the conductor can see it and the engineer could see it. And, then we have a railroad track very close to where the Houston SPCA is. And he actually pulled up and stopped, honked his horn. We ran over the fence and got this poor little screech owl that was on the front of this train.

Sharon Schmalz [00:40:11] So, that was kind of one of those crazy saves we did. And we were able to get that bird back into the wild, too. So, there's so many exciting things like that where we can take care of them and get them back into the wild. And that's our goal is always to do it quickly.

Sharon Schmalz [00:40:30] We don't hold the animals. A lot of times people think, "Oh, it must be so neat to hold an owl or a hawk." But we look at it as, these are wild animals. It's stressful to them for us to hold them. Even our volunteers, when we're training them, they're, we're like, "These are not pets. They don't want to be held. They don't need to be talked to. We don't want to imprint them."

Sharon Schmalz [00:40:51] But when we release them, we want them to be able to take care of themselves again and be wild again. And that's always our goal.

Sharon Schmalz [00:41:01] And I think that's one of the things that makes it a little easier. They're pet animals is. So, we can't keep them. You know, they are protected by state and federal law. So, it's a little easier on me. It's a different kind of attachment you get to them. It's like, you know that this is an animal that belongs out in the wild. It doesn't belong in captivity. And so, it makes it a little easier when you know that, you know. I think it would be a little harder with dogs and cats.

David Todd [00:41:32] Well, so, I'm sure there are many animals, from 'possums to hawks to owls to mockingbirds to squirrels that, you know, many of us have seen and yet I understand that you've also treated some animals that are very rare and, I think, if I understood correctly, you've treated, birds like piping plovers and bald eagles and, some of the rare reptiles, like alligator snapping turtles and then, I guess an animal that just recently came off the endangered species list - the brown pelican. And I was hoping that you might be able to tell us about your experiences with some of those pretty unusual species.

Sharon Schmalz [00:42:20] Yeah, we have. Some of those we've worked with during oil spill responses, oil spills that we've responded to, especially the brown pelicans. But there was, I don't know if I wrote down the year, but there was a time where we took in over 200 brown pelicans within about a week to two-week period from Galveston. And, those guys had all kinds of fish hooks and stuff all down in them. They were starving to death.

Sharon Schmalz [00:42:52] And so there was a, it was called a trout run, I think, or the flounder run. And people were out fishing. And fishermen weren't doing it on purpose, but they were throwing out a line with bait on it. And these young brown pelicans were coming down just to get the bait. And when they did, they get the hook and sometimes the line and all, and took off and of course couldn't go all the way.

Sharon Schmalz [00:43:18] And so they were all down inside the bird - in the esophagus, some of them all the way down in the stomach. Our veterinarians had to actually put their hands down there and pull out a lot of these hooks and lures. And, we have a picture of just all the stuff that we found in these poor brown pelicans. And that was in 2014. There were 93 brown pelicans. That's what it was. And then a further 17 were admitted right after that.

Sharon Schmalz [00:43:46] So, there was just a lot of brown pelicans that were affected. But most of those we were able to get back out to the wild. And, you know, you still, even though they're off the endangered species list, you still worry about them, right? I mean, they're not ... they still have things that we have to monitor and watch.

Sharon Schmalz [00:44:07] There's parasites they get that can actually kill young ones. I still worry about them. And it's a way that, you know, we kind of still help monitor different things that are going on with them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:44:19] And some of these things - like there's a, with the brown pelicans, there's a parasite they get that's non-native to here and so they get it from the fish, who get it from a snail who's not native here. And they don't know if it came in on a ship, not sure where it came from, but it's very hard on the brown pelicans here. If we get them early enough, we can treat them and get rid of it.

Sharon Schmalz [00:44:45] So, we've learned a lot over the years about brown pelicans, especially living that close to Galveston. We get a lot of them every year. And one of my favorites - very stinky, because they eat fish. But, it is one of my favorites. It's fun to, to work with them, and being that they were on the endangered species list.

Sharon Schmalz [00:45:08] And we still get, bald eagles. We get a lot of bald eagles that come through. Right now, we're seeing a lot. They're starting to ... sometimes they'll be fighting. The males will fight. Sometimes, they've been hit by cars, because they will eat carrion. They will eat dead things on the road. So, a lot of times a car will hit them while they're down on the road eating. So, a lot of different ways that that we do get bald eagles.

Sharon Schmalz [00:45:37] And we work closely with U.S. Fish and Wildlife. We have to inform them every time that we do receive one, that we have a bald eagle, and how to proceed with it.

Sharon Schmalz [00:45:50] And they're amazingly large. So the one of the last ones I held was, like, almost as tall as I am - up to my chin. So, they can be dangerous to people. And making sure that people have enough training to handle a bald eagle.

Sharon Schmalz [00:46:08] Let's see. What else? The alligator snapping turtles: those are pretty neat species, too. And they're threatened in our area. And, we found some that were, stuck in, it was like in a drainage pipe. And these snapping turtles were so big that they got stuck in the pipe, and they couldn't get out. And the water levels had gone down so people could see there's like, at least two of them and they were struggling. And, we were very lucky because the local fire department came out and they used one of their Jaws of Life that they use to open up cars, they used it on the pipe to open it up.

Sharon Schmalz [00:46:46] And so we were able to get them out of there. And we were able to feed them and get them hydrated and everything. And they were eventually released. We work with some reptile people in the area that do work with them. Actually, they count the alligator snapping turtles, and they know where all their habitats are, and they were able to get them back, and release them back into a better situation. So, that was that was pretty amazing.

Sharon Schmalz [00:47:14] But, you know, every time we work with, you know, different species like that, you learn so much more. And you can't learn it all in one day, or on one individual. So, over time, you know, you learn more and more things about them. And that helps. It helps to us to be able to respond quickly and get them back out into the wild.

David Todd [00:47:37] This is fascinating. And, you know, it sounds like every one of these injured animals has a distinctive story. I was wondering if you had any other stories about perhaps piping plovers, which I guess are quite a rare and endangered species in our area.

Sharon Schmalz [00:47:54] Yeah. Most, the only two I really remember were the piping plovers that came in from Galveston. It was quite a while back. I'm having a hard time remembering exactly what happened with them. But, you know, if people can catch an animal like that, then they need help. And so, I do remember them bringing them into the wildlife center. I don't think they have fractures or anything. It was probably a parasite issue that we saw in them. But, like I said, that was several years ago.

Sharon Schmalz [00:48:26] And then during oil spill response, we've seen a couple of them too, walking through the oil.

Sharon Schmalz [00:48:30] So, a lot of times they're not debilitated enough to catch them, but if they are, they get enough oil on their feathers, then we're able to catch them and wash them and get them back out in the wild. Yeah.

David Todd [00:48:43] Well, speaking of oil spills, I think that one story I had heard, that you were involved with involved brown pelicans. I think it was actually across the border into Louisiana. And I thought maybe we could talk about that and then sort of segue into all the work you've done with oil spill response, just in general.

Sharon Schmalz [00:49:03] Okay. Um, yeah, so, the one I think you're referring to, it was actually in Breton Sound in Louisiana, and that was in what year was it? 2005.

Sharon Schmalz [00:49:17] And it was very unique. So, apparently there were only eleven barrels of oil that spilled, and it, actually, let's see here, I got to remember all the numbers exactly. There were 983 juvenile brown pelicans that were oiled. So it was very unique to have that many oiled animals, well, baby pelicans at one time. Actually, to have that many baby pelicans at one time was very unique.

Sharon Schmalz [00:49:49] And so, we worked with International Bird Rescue out of California and Tri-State from the East Coast, and all three organizations, with U.S. Fish and Wildlife, worked together on these pelicans. And it was quite an endeavor. And the location was part of a National Wildlife Refuge, and it was also designated as a National Wilderness preservation system. So, highly protected area.

Sharon Schmalz [00:50:17] And, you know, we had to get on boats and actually, you know, go out to the area, which it was like about a 45-minute boat ride to even get out there. And of course, it was the hottest time of the year in Louisiana. It was like 100 degrees. And when we came around that island and saw just these massive baby brown pelicans, 983 that were sitting there burning up, basically. They were cooking. They had oil all over them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:50:48] And the parents had left. And normally the parents would kind of shade them and stuff, when you look at rookeries. But these guys had been oiled, during a, there was a small storm that came through. And, so the parents were gone, and these poor guys were just ... and they were so hot and they were going off into the water trying to cool off, but they couldn't swim or fly. And so some of them actually drowned in the waters that they were getting into.

Sharon Schmalz [00:51:15] It was heartbreaking. I mean, that was probably one of the hardest oil spills I've ever done. Working with that many of them. And trying to get them collected. And, we didn't have a lot of help collecting them when they were in the national waters. But when they got into the state waters, the Louisiana state waters, the game wardens, they were like putting them in their boats and heading to shore, to the wildlife center we were setting up.

Sharon Schmalz [00:51:42] And so, that was, that was a really heartbreaking one to see that many little baby pelicans that were in that condition. And, we worked... And as with all oil spills (and they're all little different) but they're all hard work. I mean, we worked twelve, thirteen hours a day with the baby pelicans, seven days a week.

Sharon Schmalz [00:52:04] I don't know if you want me to go into all this detail, but stop me if I get too much.

Sharon Schmalz [00:52:09] But we would work seven days a week on these little guys in trying to get the oil off of them and trying to stabilize them. And we were actually there in Louisiana about two months, trying to get these guys back. Because one of the things is they were babies, so we couldn't just wash them and put them back on the island. And there were no parents. And that island had kind of subsided anyway, after the storm.

Sharon Schmalz [00:52:36] And so, we had to come up with a plan. And, actually slowly, like, it's called hacking. It's a technique we use to reintroduce animals back into the wild. I mean, rehabbers use that same kind of idea. So, we had to find a place, an island that Fish and Wildlife really wanted them to start using as a rookery that was more stable. And we had to take them out there and put them on that island. But we had to go out like three times a day

for maybe the first two weeks to feed them because they still needed to be pampered. They couldn't fly. Some of them were tiny babies. And then the next two weeks we did twice a day, and then the next two weeks, once a day. And we kind of slowly weaned them off.

Sharon Schmalz [00:53:18] And the great thing was, they were all banded by U.S. Fish and Wildlife, color banded too. And so it was the most rewarding thing was when we would go out there and see those, because we would throw, started throwing the fish in the water, in the ponds on the island. And the wild brown pelicans would come in because they are moochers. And so they would come in. They'd eat the free fish, and then we would see our babies with their color bands flying off with them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:53:46] And we're like, "Aah!", that's what we wanted to happen.

Sharon Schmalz [00:53:49] So it was, that response was, you know, one of those I'll never forget. It was hard, hard work - lots of hours spent. But it was so fun to see them go back into the wild.

Sharon Schmalz [00:54:04] And then unfortunately, we all got home, and a couple of weeks later, Hurricane Katrina hit. And so we were back in Louisiana working with seven oil companies after Katrina that had spills. And so, we were taking care of animals that came through after Katrina. So, I was in Louisiana about four months, no, about five or six months that year.

David Todd [00:54:31] Wow. Boy, this this sounds like a really impressive, full-time, as you say, you know, 24-7 kind of commitment.

David Todd [00:54:43] So, let's talk about oil spills. I understand that you have been involved in wildlife rehab for more than fifty oil spills or other kinds of hazardous releases since about 1990. And clearly Katrina must have been one of the highlights, and this other incident with the brown pelicans. But are there are there are other kinds of accidents that you've had to respond to that involved oil or other fluids that sort of spring to mind as being pretty dramatic?

Sharon Schmalz [00:55:19] Yeah. All those fifty responses (well, it's hard to believe, it's been fifty!), but, they were all a little different. You know, sometimes you went out and you captured, you know, eight brown pelicans. You washed them and you released them in two days, you know, or not that quickly, but in five days.

Sharon Schmalz [00:55:36] And then there are other times where, like with the baby pelicans, we were there two months, two and a half months. And Katrina, we really there like two, two and a half months.

Sharon Schmalz [00:55:45] And so it just, they all vary. They all had a little different thing to them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:55:52] But to go back a little bit on that, I think, you know, one of the first spills I did, it was in Galveston and we were on the front page of the Houston Chronicle, washing and scrubbing a duck. And we had on no PPE. We didn't have on gloves. We didn't have any safety glasses. We didn't have on any kind PPE. And looking back on that, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, that's terrible.

Sharon Schmalz [00:56:19] But it kind of made us realize that we needed to start doing some more training, and that we needed to have some safety training, some HAZWOPER that you talked about earlier, some hazardous waste training.

Sharon Schmalz [00:56:33] And so, one of the things that we did is we, that's when we contacted the Texas General Land Office, and I talked to them about doing some workshops, if they would sponsor some workshops for us. And they did.

Sharon Schmalz [00:56:47] And so, starting in 1996, we've done 126 oiled wildlife response workshops that were mainly sponsored by the Texas General Land Office, trained about 5000 people.

Sharon Schmalz [00:57:02] Now all those people maybe never respond to something.

Sharon Schmalz [00:57:07] [Excuse me just a minute. Sorry, my voice is going.] U.

Sharon Schmalz [00:57:14] But we did have them. We had a database that we could pull from if we needed to. But it's always tricky using people that are volunteers because we don't want anybody to get hurt. And during oil spill response, even brown pelicans, the hook of that beak can rip open your PPE, they can slice your face.

Sharon Schmalz [00:57:36] And so, we do want to make sure that people have some kind of hands-on, or there's other things that they can do. And so, after these workshops, some of them might volunteer to like just defrost fish. I mean, when you're looking at, you know, all these baby pelicans that need fish, we've got to have food for them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:57:56] [Hold on. Just a second.]

David Todd [00:57:58] [No problem.]

Sharon Schmalz [00:58:03] And, but one of the things that I thought was always interesting about oiled response workshop, is that a lot of times people didn't realize, general public didn't realize, that there was stuff going on all the time. Like, we were involved, I was involved, in a lot of drills. Oil companies have to have drills. It's a requirement. It's a law.

Sharon Schmalz [00:58:24] And so, we would, you know, "pretend". There would be a scenario that, you know, a pipeline busted or something happened out in the Gulf. And what would we do to take care of the wildlife?

Sharon Schmalz [00:58:39] And so we, you know, that goes on all the time where we're doing drills all the time. So, you know, I've done all these spills, I've done all these trainings. And then we also do training with the oil companies. So you know, it's been a heavy, busy, season of things that we do.

Sharon Schmalz [00:58:59] And the public though would sometimes think during these workshops. They'd be like, "Oh, you mean all this was going on? We just thought an oil spill happened...". And I'm like, "And you thought, "Do the wildlife." And I'm like, "Yeah". I'm like, "Oh no, no, no, we got plans." We know along the Texas coast where we would set up different places to wash animals. So, you know, we had, there were plans going on all the time.

Sharon Schmalz [00:59:26] And then I think one of the other things from the oil spill workshops that came to me is how people didn't realize that when we, and maybe I was very really fortunate, but all the fifty responses I did and all the trainings I did with oil companies, most of them wanted to put the environment back to how it was. They wanted it to be good again. They wanted it to be clean again, and we always got support from them.

Sharon Schmalz [00:59:55] And I think that says a lot, that after 40 years of doing this that I never came across a problem. And, we always were able to ... any kind of equipment we needed, we would get it. And the Texas General Land Office is very, very supportive of wildlife. They always were there to help us, too. And I always knew, if I had a problem, I could go to them. But they, you know, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife was usually there. And so we, I've worked very closely with them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:00:27] I mean, there was one person with one of the big oil companies, and he was actually an ornithologist, and he was one of the head people on response. And so, you know, he wanted to see it all back. He wanted the environment back, he wanted the birds back, he wanted to get them back into the wild.

Sharon Schmalz [01:00:44] So, I think that's one of the highlights of doing what I did all these years of oil spill response is seeing that, that there were a lot of people who care and that, you know, do want to do what I want to do - do want to get it back, how it's supposed to be.

David Todd [01:01:00] That's nice that you have that feeling of support and endorsement, that you know that equipment will be provided.

David Todd [01:01:09] And, I'm curious, you know, as you went through these training workshops and did these drills, and I think you helped develop these best practices manuals, have you seen things evolve? I think you mentioned that, you know, in the early days, y'all weren't provided and didn't use PPE as much as you might have wanted to in later years. Are there other ways that the response to spill incidents have changed and improved in your view?

Sharon Schmalz [01:01:46] I mean, definitely the PPE part of it. And I think, in general, just in over 40 years, just even the people that were cleaning up the oil, I saw more and more of the safety things that happened. Even just minor things of getting in and out of a boat because you've got like two pelicans, you know, two boxes of pelicans, you're trying to get back into a boat. Just safety, you know, issues on that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:02:11] I think the other thing is, um, the plans that are now so prevalent, that weren't a long time ago. I mean, it was like every time you went to an area, you weren't sure where you were going to set up. But we've got a lot of plans now as to, you know, where, rehabilitation would take place.

Sharon Schmalz [01:02:34] Seemed like there was something else I can say on that, but definitely it's evolved. And it's gotten, it's a lot better than it was 40 years ago, you know.

Sharon Schmalz [01:02:44] And on the animal part of it with us. We started working with Dr. Heatley at Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine, and she is really interested in birds. She helped a lot. She's boarded in avian care, you know, and started doing, trying to get some, we got some funding from Texas General Land Office to look at some of the blood work and some

of the electrolytes on some of the species that would be affected during oil spills, and what was the best thing to use and best thing to do for them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:03:15] So, I mean, I think, to me, there's still a lot more to go. You know, there's still a lot more we can learn, on species affected by wildlife. But it's like night and day is what it was thirty years ago, thirty, forty years ago.

David Todd [01:03:30] Well that's impressive.

David Todd [01:03:31] And do you find that there are, more precautions against pipeline leaks or oil spill accidents due to, I don't know, collisions or storms?

Sharon Schmalz [01:03:47] I'm not an expert on that, for sure. But just from the things I've been around, I would say, "Yes". I mean, I don't think any oil company ever wants to have a spill because it costs them a lot of money, to get things back to how they how they should be.

Sharon Schmalz [01:04:04] So, I think especially the bigger oil companies are very aware, of things to be careful of. I don't know that, like I say, I don't know that as a fact, but it does seem like that to me. And they react very quickly. So, yeah, I think they do.

Sharon Schmalz [01:04:23] And some of it's probably driven by some of the laws. I mean, I know now they do have to have, certain permits and they have to have plans. They have to have drills every year. So, you know, some of that is driven by that - some of the laws they have to follow.

David Todd [01:04:40] Okay.

Sharon Schmalz [01:04:42] I think it's something that they try to avoid as much as they can.

David Todd [01:04:46] That's understandable.

David Todd [01:04:49] So, you know, I think about oil spills as being often very dramatic. You know, there's a big storm that's come in or there's been a fire and explosion. But, I understand there are also situations where there's just a kind of persistent background seep, you know, there's some unknown sheen. Is that something you run across very often?

Sharon Schmalz [01:05:16] You know, I don't think we see it as much in the Gulf Coast as they do on the West Coast, California area. But there are sheens that will occur. And sometimes they never do really find out where it came from. You know, and like you say, it's probably like a seep. So, you know, there a lot of times when there's a big flood of oil, they can, you know, monitors will show that there's been a change in something. But a lot of times it's just a sheen out there, which animals can still get into.

Sharon Schmalz [01:05:45] I mean, there have been spills. And, you know, we talk about those kind of spills, but there's also, we've had a lot of animals, not a lot, but we've had several animals from just vegetable oil spills. People have, you know, some restaurants have taken vegetable oil and dumped into a little reservoir somewhere, and animals have gotten into them. And it's just as deadly, and just as hard on them as, you know, other kind of oil, petroleum-based oil.

David Todd [01:06:15] I see, that's interesting.

Sharon Schmalz [01:06:17] Yeah.

David Todd [01:06:18] I didn't know about that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:06:19] And then, um, I know there's been a good deal of, of talk about the Deepwater Horizon explosion and sort of debates about whether there have been sort of ongoing residual effects from that. Do you see any of those kind of impacts that are, you know, have happened in the years after that, after the oil spill was kind of closed down and sealed?

Sharon Schmalz [01:06:51] You know, not that I know of. But once again, that's not something I would really be an expert on. I know they're doing a lot of monitoring and stuff like that, but, not really that I have witnessed.

David Todd [01:07:07] Okay.

David Todd [01:07:08] Well, let's shift tack a little bit here and...

Sharon Schmalz [01:07:13] OK.

David Todd [01:07:13] And talk a little bit about other things that may bring animals into the Wildlife Center. I think that wildfires have been an issue for, you know, the Houston and the nine-county region.

Sharon Schmalz [01:07:29] Yeah.

David Todd [01:07:30] Can you give us some examples of the sort of problems you see there?

Sharon Schmalz [01:07:36] I don't remember how many years ago it was, but it was in Bastrop where they had the wildfires, and we received a lot of, or several fawns that had succumbed to the fumes and stuff. And we were able to, you know, bring them in and give them oxygen and get them hydrated and get them back out in the wild. So, definitely, definitely, wildfires are something that we can help respond to and have responded to. Yeah.

Sharon Schmalz [01:08:11] And then flooding is another thing.

David Todd [01:08:13] Yeah. Let's talk about flooding because I know that that Houston, many parts of it, are flood-prone - some of the storm surges and big fronts that come through. Maybe you can give us some ideas of how you deal with floods.

Sharon Schmalz [01:08:33] During a lot of the floods, we do get a lot of help from the Houston SPCA rescue group. They have a lot of boats and stuff that they can go out and help rescue animals. During one of the floods, I can't, I don't know if I have the date, but there were fawns that were landlocked. There was just this little strip of land that was above the water. And they were in there just kind of frantic because there was no mom around or anything, and, they were able to go over and rescue them. Some of them were trying to get in the water and swim, but they were really, you know, too young.

Sharon Schmalz [01:09:16] And so, flooding is, you know, always an issue too that we're able to help animals with.

Sharon Schmalz [01:09:22] And, there were a lot of even opossums and stuff that were affected by some of the floods. But we don't see as many birds during floods, that I can think of. I really can't think of too many birds. But definitely we do see a lot of mammals, even the armadillos. We've seen a lot of armadillos get in trouble, can't get from one area to another, because some of these flooding events will last for quite a while. So, it's not like you can just leave them sitting there. And so, we usually do retrieve them, and the Houston SPCA rescue will help with that, help us on that. And, then we can take care of them. And when everything subsides, we can get them back out. And we try to put them back where we found, whenever we can.

Sharon Schmalz [01:10:14] And we do do a lot of work with, like, Hurricane Ike. After Hurricane Ike, we took in 897 animals, and that was just in a few days. And, we had only been at the SPCA a little bit, as part of the Houston SPCA. It was just not even a year, I don't think. And so, when some of us stayed there and, when I walked in and I looked out the door, since the storms came in at night, and the next day, by noon, there was a line all the way out to the Houston SPCA, and people with boxes.

Sharon Schmalz [01:10:51] And I'm like, oh my gosh, there's that many puppies and kittens? And one of the veterinarians turned around and said, "No, they're all yours. They're all squirrels." I'm like, "Oh, no!".

Sharon Schmalz [01:11:02] And so that was in 2008, and, yeah, in five days, 897 animals, mainly squirrels. And, we just set up these triage tables and we had help come in from other SPCAs out-of-state that came in to help us. And we were just, like, veterinarians were like giving fluids, just like in a row. It was like an assembly line.

Sharon Schmalz [01:11:29] And we had people coming in to help, and we didn't even have that big of a staff at that time, because we'd only been there not even a year. And so, we got some of our best volunteers. In fact, one of our volunteers here, Sharon Balke - she just showed up. She heard about all these baby squirrels. I didn't know her. She didn't know me and she said, "Hey, do you need help?" So "Here's a squirrel, feed him". So, and she's still with us. And so, that that's pretty cool that she still comes and volunteers.

Sharon Schmalz [01:12:01] But that was that was kind of crazy. Those storms are crazy. And one of the things we saw during after Hurricane Ike, was there were a lot of boats in Galveston that were turned upside down. And so there was a lot of leakage of oil out of all of that, out of the boats when they were upside down. And so we did see like an osprey, we got an osprey and it was oiled, a couple of other birds that, you know, during that event that, that we took in too.

Sharon Schmalz [01:12:27] So, yeah, those hurricanes, they're always hard on those.

David Todd [01:12:35] I bet.

David Todd [01:12:35] Well, speaking of other kinds of natural disasters, I think that many parts of the state suffered pretty badly from the freeze that was associated with that February 2021 ice storm that came through. Did you see impacts from that storm in the animals that might have come into your Center?

Sharon Schmalz [01:13:01] Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Actually, we're a little worried about what's coming up next week, too, with all the predicted 20s and 18 degrees and stuff. But one

of the big animals that we see a lot after freezes like that are the brown pelicans. And we usually don't see the impact for about anywhere from, you know, a week to two weeks, sometimes three weeks. And we'll see frostbite on them. We've actually have seen them lose like part of their feet that has frostbite and parts of their beak that has been injured too by the cold.

Sharon Schmalz [01:13:38] So, just one more thing that the, you know, poor brown pelicans. They're just like, they seem to be between, you know, oil spills and freezing temperatures and parasites, I feel like they still just struggle. You know, it's just hard for them. Their populations are up. But there's still a lot of things. And I think that's why, in Texas, they're still considered, I believe they're still considered endangered, if not threatened in Texas, as a state. And so, they're keeping a, you know, really good eye on them. But, that cold weather like that...

Sharon Schmalz [01:14:12] And we treat it a lot like burns, frostbite. We treat it a lot like burns. And we got a lot of information from the Shriner's hospital in Galveston, using some products that they use for burns. And so, we've seen a lot of success. We've seen some heartbreak on them, too, because sometimes they will lose, like, a whole piece of their beak. And so it's ... there's some heartbreak with that too. But they're, very affected by the freezes. That's the one that I think of mostly in the freeze situation.

Sharon Schmalz [01:14:50] And then there's that secondary part of freezes because it also affects the insects, and the food that birds who have now migrated here, because they follow that population, they follow the insect movement. Now they're kind of put it at risk because they can't find enough food to eat. And, you know, that's even some of the hawks and the owls - they're impacted, secondary to the insects being impacted.

David Todd [01:15:23] Yeah, I heard that's a problem for purple martins.

Sharon Schmalz [01:15:27] Yeah.

David Todd [01:15:28] Well, so, I think that one of the kind of unusual examples you gave earlier about wildlife impacts came from a construction project that that I think affected a rookery. And I was hoping you could sort of fill us in on that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:15:49] Yeah, I'm trying to think if I have the numbers on that. So, yeah, there was a rookery, in the, you know, north part of Houston. And, the people wanted to build something there. And they were already told by Texas Parks and Wildlife that they could not do that. There were active nests there. There were trees full of herons and egrets. And they were told that they could not, you know, do that as long as there was active wildlife there. And so, then they got another call from a neighbor who said, "You know, they're out there cutting down trees."

Sharon Schmalz [01:16:25] And so, when Texas Parks and Wildlife went out there, there were just, you know, a lot of times there's babies in there when they cut down a tree like that, the babies hit the ground and die. And there were dead babies. There were eggs busted open. And then the saddest part was they were picking up some of these babies that were not dead, and they were putting them in plastic bags, basically to dispose of them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:16:52] And fortunately, Texas Parks and Wildlife got there and called us and they're like, "We need help. There's a lot."

Sharon Schmalz [01:17:00] And so we ended up with 71 injured or orphaned great egrets and great blue herons. And, we were, you know, we had to quickly set up kind of a triage system, pick them up, get them stabilized, triage them. Very sad to see stuff like that. And, we work closely with Texas Parks and Wildlife and they helped us, you know, get all of them picked up and, and taken care of. And that was in 2022. So that was that was just very sad. And, and it's something that can be avoided.

Sharon Schmalz [01:17:38] And, and I've seen it with, yellow-crowned night heroes because they are messy and they are stinky because they eat fish. And so we get a lot of calls like, "I don't want these birds here anymore." And we tell them, "Look, you know, you're going to have to wait till they're not nesting, they're not roosting there. And then you can do whatever you want to do to your trees."

Sharon Schmalz [01:17:56] But one year there was a huge, gorgeous oak tree down in the, I think it was in the Deer Park area. And this guy (and of course the neighbors called on him) and he did the same thing. He just cut down this beautiful tree because there were all these herons and egrets in there.

Sharon Schmalz [01:18:12] And, this was U.S. Fish and Wildlife. And they went out, collected them and, you know, and brought them to us. I don't even remember the numbers. That was quite a while back. But it was the same thing. There were eggs. There were busted eggs. There were alive and also deceased baby herons and stuff.

Sharon Schmalz [01:18:30] And so, yeah, that is another thing that we do see. And once again, we try so hard to educate people. And so does Fish and Wildlife and Texas Parks and Wildlife. But sometimes they don't listen. And they do fine them, you know, when they find this. But it's like, you know, now all this loss of life that wasn't necessary. You know, it could have waited till they weren't there nesting. Yeah.

David Todd [01:18:56] Well, and I think you touched on this earlier, folks pointing out that, or were suggesting that you all were intervening in something that Mother Nature would have carried out in a normal way and that, you know, loss and death is just part of the natural world. But it sounds like there are intentional problems, like when folks cut down a tree, but then there's also sort of this general development pressure in the Houston area, and a lot of Texas for that matter.

Sharon Schmalz [01:19:32] Yeah, yeah.

David Todd [01:19:32] Do you see that kind of pressure as being a significant problem for wildlife?

Sharon Schmalz [01:19:39] Yeah. Yes, I think it's very significant. You know, because we all want to do it now and we want our house now. We want to go in and bulldoze things down. And, you know, especially in the spring when there's, you know, so many animals out there, yeah, it's definitely a problem. And, that's why there's laws against it. And, you know, people always like, "Well, I'm not going to get caught", but there's always somebody, a neighbor or somebody that hopefully that cares enough to, you know, call and report them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:20:14] Even with the wetlands, you know, they'll go in and they know it's a designated wetlands, but nobody's looking. Let's just go ahead and take care of it and bulldoze it now.

Sharon Schmalz [01:20:23] So, you know, it's just that constant education with people in trying to slow them down, you know, but we kind of want it when we want it. Right? We don't want to wait. And, I mean I see it just in general, like people that find birds in the eaves of their house. "Well, I want them out now." "Well, baby songbirds, from the time they hatch to the time they fledge and leave the nest, it's only ten days. Ten days." "Well, no, I want them out." "No, you can't have them out right now." You know, it's ten days.

Sharon Schmalz [01:20:57] So, you know, it's just sad that that's happening, and they don't always, you know, see the bigger picture of things.

Sharon Schmalz [01:21:07] And I think it goes back to that, my philosophy is, you know, that that's a life. It's still alive. It still feels. It still has pain, sensations. You know, it needs to be there with its mom. And ten days. But yeah, when you see that, even at that level.

David Todd [01:21:30] Wow. Well, so one of the things I'm really intrigued by is that not only are you caring for these animals after you've collected them and gotten them stabilized, but you're also trying to get them back in the wild. And, I'm curious how, first of all, when you're collecting an animal, how do you make the decision, this poor creature is going to make it or probably won't. You know, how do you make that triage decision? I think that'd be a good thing to understand more about.

Sharon Schmalz [01:22:13] You know, I would say that's one of the hardest things we do, because none of us are in this to euthanize an animal. We want to take care of them and get them back in the wild. But we are governed by state and federal laws that tell us that if the animal can't be put back into the wild, or we can't find an educational institution or zoo or whatever to put them back into, then the animal does have to be, you know, euthanized.

Sharon Schmalz [01:22:40] And so, once again, I think it goes back to the experience level, the experience level of our staff that has, you know, seen particular injuries that have come in that we have tried before, and they're not releasable. So, trying to go through that triage and making those determinations sooner, but it's hard. It's a hard decision.

Sharon Schmalz [01:23:07] And zoos will only take so many. They're not going to take more than two eagles. They're not going to take more than 1 or 2. You know, red-tailed hawks, most of them. So it is hard to place them too. Everybody's like, "Oh, it's an eagle". It's like, you know, there's a rehabber right now that has like six of them that can't be put back in the wild. Nobody wants them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:23:29] And, you know, there's a lot of requirements that go along with keeping one in captivity, which should be because they do need to have certain kind of guidelines. But it is hard.

Sharon Schmalz [01:23:43] But then sometimes when you see them come in and they're really beat up and you know they have been through a lot, it's almost like it's a gift we give them to give them relief. And it's not our first choice ever, but sometimes it is a gift when they're in terrible shape.

Sharon Schmalz [01:24:01] And there's certain species that also do better in captivity than other species. You know, some of the like Cooper's hawks, the accipiters, the just real flitty little birds that, like, jump around and fly in between branches to catch other birds. They

never settle down in captivity. In fact, when we get them in for rehab, it's like as soon as we can, we get them back out in the wild, because they're just, they're very high strung. And so, there's a lot of species that don't do as well as other species.

David Todd [01:24:37] So, here's another question. You know, within this sort of spectrum of wildlife that might come in, I imagine that there are some animals that are rare, some that are common, some that are native, some that are non-native, some that are feral. How do you balance those kind of features of an animal, decide, yeah, we need to invest in trying to care for this animal versus, you know, not.

Sharon Schmalz [01:25:08] Yeah, well, I would say that obviously, a threatened, endangered animal, we are going to do a lot with because their numbers are already down. But, as I said earlier, we still learn a lot from the common species that aren't endangered or threatened, so that we learn a lot working with them. Like, I was talking about even putting pins in wings and, you know, like, that's not going to work. If that break is here, we've already done that on this common species here. We know that that's not going to work.

Sharon Schmalz [01:25:44] So, that's one of the things that is part of that triage is knowing, you know, when to make that decision. And it's based on experience and it's, you know, based on working with some of the other animals. So that's kind of what we do with that.

David Todd [01:26:03] Okay.

David Todd [01:26:04] So, say you've done what you can, and an animal appears to be ready to be returned to the wild. How do you decide, first, when is it truly ready? And then, where to take it. I think you mentioned earlier, sometimes you try to take it back to the site where it was collected. But maybe that's not a possibility. So, you know, what are your options and choices there?

Sharon Schmalz [01:26:34] So making a decision of when they're ready is very important because we don't want to put them back out there when they're compromised. However, that innate desire to be wild and find food is just in there. Right?

Sharon Schmalz [01:26:50] And so, we get them out. We are very lucky. We have a wonderful flight cage that is like sixty feet each. There's two of them together, sixty-foot long, twenty feet wide, with dividing door in between. We can actually open the door and it's a circular flight.

Sharon Schmalz [01:27:07] So, we can put eagles in there, I mean, any kind of bird in there, and really stress them and get them to fly so that, because they're just like people, and if you break your leg and you can't walk on it for, you know, several weeks, then when you do start trying to run or walk, you're going to be winded, you have lost. And it has happens very easily with birds.

Sharon Schmalz [01:27:29] They have to be exercised, because if we let them go, especially birds of prey like hawks and owls, and if we let them go and they're, still, like they make one pass in the flight cage and you can see them sitting there [panting] and they're tired, they're not going to be able to survive out in the wild.

Sharon Schmalz [01:27:45] So, there is a lot that goes into that, making sure, as well as we can, that, you know, they are going to be able to do that. But then, like I say, there's a line in them that's just so innate. Like when you release, like a raccoon, a baby raccoon that's been

raised by a human, and you release him at six months old, how do they know to automatically run up that tree and get that pine cone and start pulling it apart to get that little seed right at the base of it? We didn't teach them that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:28:16] You know, how do they know to start digging to find insects in the dirt? We didn't teach them that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:28:21] And so, you know, a lot of it is innate. Birds of prey, mom doesn't really teach them as much as lets them practice, and "Oh, my gosh, you haven't caught anything to eat in a while. So, here's a a robin", you know. But, so much of that is just, you know, learning to, just practicing it, you know, and letting those innate abilities that they have take over and start hunting and whatever they need to do to survive.

Sharon Schmalz [01:28:52] So, you know, so, and once again, it goes back to that experience and knowing that history and knowing about that species and what they need and what they eat and what they do. Even with the water birds, we get a lot o herons and egrets and stuff, and just providing them fish. And so, how do they know this is the fish? "Oh, look at this. Let's eat this", you know.

Sharon Schmalz [01:29:13] And so, it's, to me, it's fascinating. I love that part of this. I love, and I think that's part of, you know, what I've always liked about wildlife rehabilitation. And one of the veterinarians told me that, she said, "Well, that's why you're, that's because you've got that science. You've got that engineering background, you know, getting it organized, watching how it happens, reevaluating it, coming up with those systems. It's really important." And wildlife centers, you know, you have to come up with those ways of making those determinations and those decisions and when to get them out of there and back into the wild.

David Todd [01:29:51] Well, I guess there's just a lot of practice and experience in knowing, you know, from past work with these injured animals when they're ready to be let go.

Sharon Schmalz [01:30:02] Yes.

David Todd [01:30:02] And so, say you do decide that it's time for them to return to the wild. Do you, I guess some of these animals go to a zoo. But I imagine some go to just open fields or forests, to state parks or national forests?

Sharon Schmalz [01:30:25] Right. And, yeah, that's a good question because we try to always get them back to the area they came from because, that's where they need to be. And some of them are mated pairs and need to get back. Especially eagles are one of those that we always get back to the same area.

Sharon Schmalz [01:30:42] But we have some guidelines from Texas Parks and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife, too, about that. Like fawns, they have to go back like five to ten miles from where they were found, which makes it a little difficult. We've had to keep really good records on that. So, but sometimes if we are going to just take him somewhere and release him, we do have to have permission from the homeowner where it's going to go, or the park or wherever it's going to go. So, we do get permission.

Sharon Schmalz [01:31:13] And, you know, we try to find places more outside of Houston, you know, not right in the city. The city keeps growing, but, you know, we do try to get them further and further out.

Sharon Schmalz [01:31:26] And we try to, you know, share that moment with some people a lot of times. Like one time we were just going out to release something and there were some kids and they were just like, "Oh my gosh, what do you have in your hand?" So we were able to do some education with them and, you know, share that with them, because that's, man, that's pretty cool to be able to see, you know, an eagle back in the wild or, a great horned owl go back into the wild.

Sharon Schmalz [01:31:50] And a lot of times when we go back, like I said, great horned owl made me think of, if we know, like if a great horned owl came in that was injured, we'll let the homeowner be part of the release, you know, we'll let them watch the release and be involved in it, because that's really, it's telling them you did a good job. You helped put this guy back into the wild. And this is where it belongs - in the wild, not the cage, not your pet.

Sharon Schmalz [01:32:18] So, that's always our favorite part, of course, is getting them back into the wild.

David Todd [01:32:23] Well, that must be really heartwarming.

David Todd [01:32:27] So I was curious about these animals that maybe aren't able to return to the wild, and then those that can, how they might be used for science. And I think you mentioned at one point that those that can be released, often are banded...

Sharon Schmalz [01:32:48] Mm hmmm.

David Todd [01:32:48] And then those that cannot be released and have to be euthanized. Sometimes you provide study skins. Can you talk about those two choices?

Sharon Schmalz [01:33:01] Yeah. So, if they can't be released, I mean, if they have to be euthanized then we can, once again, governed by state and federal laws, we can provide them for study skins for schools or nature centers. But even if a nature center has a study skin for kids, it's got to be tagged saying where it came from and when. We've sent some kind of unusual birds to the Smithsonian. We've got some birds there that came from us, especially since we're in that migratory bird path. And so, things like that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:33:38] But it is something that we have to be careful about, and make sure that we're doing it legally. And then we have to report to the government that we did that.

Sharon Schmalz [01:33:48] And a lot of people say, "Well, gosh, so much rigmarole." But it goes back to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, where people used to go out and shoot an eagle and say, "Oh, I found these feathers, that now I'm going to put in my hat or in my jacket". And they didn't. They shot, they shot it. And so the Migratory Bird Treaty protects all birds, you know, in particular, so that people can't possess even a feather. Finding a feather in a park - if that's a wild bird feather, not a domestic duck - you're not supposed to keep that. I mean, how many of us have done that, right? But it truly is against the law.

Sharon Schmalz [01:34:28] So, even when we give study skins to nature centers or whatever, they do have to tag them, and it has to be that Fish and Wildlife knows it came from a legitimate thing. It wasn't somebody went out and took that animal as a take.

Sharon Schmalz [01:34:44] So, yeah. I think I got off on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act on that a little bit. But it's...

David Todd [01:34:50] No, It's really interesting how your work is governed by lots of laws and rules and permits...

Sharon Schmalz [01:34:56] Right, right. Which are there for a good reason, you know, because not everybody is there to do the right thing. Right? They want to keep that hawk as a pet, or a long time ago, they wanted feathers in all their garments and stuff.

Sharon Schmalz [01:35:11] So, you know, that's one of the things that drove those laws.

Sharon Schmalz [01:35:18] And then on the other... [Oh, go ahead.]

David Todd [01:35:20] [No, no, go, go right ahead.] I was just curious about the banding opportunity that you have with some of these birds that come through your lab.

Sharon Schmalz [01:35:31] So, yeah, we do do banding, we do band, not all our animals. We really, you know, it's kind of a long process. And we don't have a banding permit. So we have to bring somebody in that has a banding permit.

Sharon Schmalz [01:35:44] Well, one of the ones that I always think is just so fascinating is we had one of the first yellow-crowned night herons that we raised at the Wildlife Center. So that was back in, what, 19 whatever, you know. And one of the first ones we raised and we had it banded. Ten years later, that bird was found in Clear Lake area, in Texas, and that means it had migrated for ten years - gone south, come back - ten years, this bird had migrated. And he still had his band on it, and it was actually banded at my house. And my neighbor was with Texas Parks and Wildlife, and we'd been banding them for years. And so, it was cool to see that he made it that long and had reproduced, had babies, you know, came back for ten years. Because a lot of times people do say, "Well, how do you know they make it? How do you know they survive?".

Sharon Schmalz [01:36:38] And, you know, I had a red-tailed hawk that was extremely different coloration. It was very white. And, that bird, after I released it, it migrated. I never saw it all spring, but then in winter it would come back and sit on my flight cage like, "Well, I'm here. Do you have anything to eat?" And so, that bird came back. That was only for like 4 or 5 years. But that was pretty fascinating that, you know, he came back.

Sharon Schmalz [01:37:02] So we've got a lot of banding results that we know it works. You know, we can't protect them from any kind of natural thing that might happen. But, definitely, you know, it's we get them, some of them, especially brown pelicans around oil spills, they're also full of parasites. I think we put them back in better condition than how they've ever been. So, it's kind of a new lease of life.

Sharon Schmalz [01:37:26] Which reminds me, we did get a brown pelican that we had already had once before, because we banded it and released it. And two years later, we got it back, had to re-treat it, and let it go again. So, it's amazing.

David Todd [01:37:42] Yeah, what's the chance of that? That's really unusual.

Sharon Schmalz [01:37:47] Bands are hard. Sometimes you don't see bands. It's not as easy to get them back.

Sharon Schmalz [01:37:52] And then we got a peregrine falcon one here that had migrated from the north down to us. And, um, we were able to trace the band, and they actually had video of that bird, that peregrine falcon as a baby and the parents flying in and feeding them. And it was done by one of the universities up north. And so, that was interesting. It was only, I think it was two years old when we got it. So, that was pretty cool to be able to, you know, see that.

David Todd [01:38:22] Yeah, that must give you a wonderful insight into these animals' full life and their travels. You know, you get to see them for a week or a month or maybe a little bit more, and nice to know the whole picture.

Sharon Schmalz [01:38:37] Yeah.

David Todd [01:38:38] So, I was wondering if you can give us a idea of this whole picture. I mean, what do you think it is that inspires you to care for these animals? You know, what sort of place and value do you think wildlife have?

Sharon Schmalz [01:38:56] Well, that's a big question. Yeah. I mean, I feel like wildlife is very important to our ecosystem. I think it's very important to people, when they take the time to watch wildlife. I think that's why our numbers jumped a lot during Covid, because a lot of people were working from home and they were actually observing wildlife in their yard and enjoying it. And, you know, I think not realizing there were so many different kinds of animals in their yard.

Sharon Schmalz [01:39:34] And so, I think, you know, in this busy world we're in, and we're all trying to get here, and do this, and do that, and make money and do this. Being able to sit back and and enjoy wildlife that's there, and encouraging it to be there.

Sharon Schmalz [01:39:51] I think, at first, people think, "Get rid of it. I don't want it here." And a lot of that is because they don't have the knowledge. They don't understand it. And it's something foreign and it's not. "What is that?" You know, "I don't want that." "What's that mammal out there that has that long tail?"

Sharon Schmalz [01:40:08] "Well, it's an opossum. And this is why it's there. And this is what it does for you." You know, you got to bring it back to what it does for you.

Sharon Schmalz [01:40:14] And so, I think that's just, I just, I've always, I've just always felt it's important. And, you know, um, I mean, I even get to that point with plants and stuff how important they are, and the bees that are important.

Sharon Schmalz [01:40:27] And I think if we all could just take a little breather and, and even myself as the director of the Wildlife Center, it's busy all the time. And, you know, it's like, I don't ever want to get to the point where you take it for granted, because they're all important and, I don't know, I just have that love of wildlife.

David Todd [01:40:50] So this may be, um, and an affront to your, you know, engineering mind, but do you think that animals have a soul?

Sharon Schmalz [01:40:59] Well, I don't know. That's a question, but, you know, growing up and going to Catholic school, I was always told they didn't, right, and that dogs didn't go to heaven.

Sharon Schmalz [01:41:08] And so, I actually think they do. Like I always say, we know they feel. We know, you know, even whether it's, you know, a soul, I don't know. But I do believe that, you know, they were put here for a reason. And they have a reason to be here. And I feel like we need them here.

David Todd [01:41:34] Okay.

David Todd [01:41:36] So, I'm curious. You know, you've recruited and trained a lot of volunteers, and I'm wondering what it is that you think drives them. And then in turn, how do you support and recruit them, and, you know, keep them interested and gung ho about doing this kind of work, which is very hard and demanding?

Sharon Schmalz [01:42:01] You know, it is hard. And, you know, being a non-profit and working with volunteers is difficult. And, trying to find out what each individual needs. And a lot of people are very driven to the raptors - the hawks and the owls. And so, you know, everybody wants to work with the hawks and the owls. But my saying to them always is, "if you can raise a baby wren, I'm impressed." The hawks and the owls - you got a whole lot more to work with. But those smaller birds are the challenging ones.

Sharon Schmalz [01:42:36] And we have some volunteers who work with some of the songbirds who are really good. It's very time-consuming. We are feeding them anywhere from every 30 minutes to 45 minutes. And that's just during daylight hours. Mom doesn't feed them at night. But, you know, that is intense in trying to keep them fed. And you really have a great respect for mama birds, mama songbirds, about how much food they have to bring. But we have some volunteers that are just so good at it.

Sharon Schmalz [01:43:09] And I think trying to nurture that part of it. And there's a lot of cleaning. Oh, we do a lot of cleaning. It's not just walking around with an owl on your fist. I mean, I have cleaned more kennels and aquariums than anybody would ever believe. But, that is a lot of what we do, is trying to keep things clean. I mean, we are very conscious of that, disease spreading. We've got to be very careful with that kind of stuff. Now, dealing with avian influenza, we really have our protocols, and PPE has got very involved.

Sharon Schmalz [01:43:45] But it is hard to keep them. And I think some of it is also they become like, friends, of not only the animals, but friends of the staff there, and they want to help us, too. I heard some volunteers the other day saying, "Well, you know, somebody wanted me to go do something on Tuesday. And I told them I work on Tuesday." And they're not employees. They're just volunteers. But that's how they take it. Like, "I work, this is my job when I'm here."

Sharon Schmalz [01:44:13] And we just couldn't do it without our volunteers. And some of them are retired individuals who have had an extraordinary career and stuff. But now they want to do something different and they want to, you know, help wildlife. We even have a veterinarian that retired and we're like, "Oh, do you want to come in and do some of the treatments?" "Me? I'll do the cleaning and the feeding and, you know, that kind of stuff for a change."

Sharon Schmalz [01:44:43] So, but it is hard, in, in any non-profit, I think it's difficult, because you still have to have rules. I mean, there's still, you know, rules that we have to follow even for ourselves because of the laws and stuff. So, it is a difficult process keeping volunteers involved and interested in non-profits.

David Todd [01:45:06] Well, and what do you do for these volunteers who, despite all they try to do, an animal dies on their watch, or they have to euthanize an animal that is not going to recover. How do you deal with that, what must be heartbreak, or at least a sense of some kind of loss?

Sharon Schmalz [01:45:30] That is hard. And in the end, it's hard on staff too. But I think, you know, trying to get the point across that they're not out there suffering anymore. They're not laying in the middle of the street with flies all over them, and, you know, dying a slow death. And trying to explain that to them, that sometimes that is the best gift we can give them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:45:56] And we never turn one away. We never turn an animal away.

Sharon Schmalz [01:45:59] But it is hard.

Sharon Schmalz [01:46:00] And especially if they've been in there feeding that little wren for three days. And on the fourth day, he's not there anymore because he did not make it. And, one of the things like with baby birds, I think the statistics are that only 30% even make it out of the nest. Not many of them. You know, baby birds have a tough time coming out of their nest. There's all kinds of predators. There's insects that'll get them, just all kinds of things. So, we're kind of battling against the odds.

Sharon Schmalz [01:46:32] And we try to be upfront with them at the beginning, like in training and stuff, and tell them that, you know, we don't get the cream of the crop. We're getting the animals that have already suffered something, that already have some kind of problem.

Sharon Schmalz [01:46:46] So, yeah, that's a hard thing.

David Todd [01:46:52] So, I thought one of the things that was really intriguing about what you're doing is that you're not only working with the staff at the SPCA and then these volunteers that come in to help out. But you're also training a new generation of vet students. And I was curious if there are any stories you could tell about, you know, these kind of lessons and those kind of students.

Sharon Schmalz [01:47:17] Yeah, let me think what year that was - 2013. We, the Houston SPCA started a partnership with Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine. And they, every fourth-year veterinary student has to do a rotation through the Houston SPCA. And it's for a two-week period. We even have dorms on campus. When we built a new center, we actually built dorms on the campus for them so they could stay there.

Sharon Schmalz [01:47:49] And, it's so amazing, you know, to be able to provide this for them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:47:57] So, they come in and they have to do this. They do surgeries. They work with cruelty investigators. They learn shelter medicine. They work with the farm animals, and they also come into wildlife.

Sharon Schmalz [01:48:11] So, we have them in wildlife to teach them. And to me, it's like education again. Right? We're getting that into them how important wildlife is. Right? And so, some of them have never even handled an animal. And I always tell them there's going to be that day that your favorite client walks in with a red-tailed hawk in a box and wants you to take care of it. And so, we want you to be able to at least do the initial thing to get them out, give them maybe even some fluids and call a rehabber.

Sharon Schmalz [01:48:42] And so, they actually hands-on handle wildlife. They'll give medications for us. So, they learn a lot about, you know, because a lot of them aren't going to go into wildlife medicine, but because there's not that many occupations in that. But they're like, I say, one of their, you know, somebody is going to bring in a wild animal at one point in their career. And so trying to, you know, share that knowledge with them.

Sharon Schmalz [01:49:09] Talk about the laws within them, that even as a veterinarian, you can't keep it, that you can work with it, especially if you're working under a rehabilitator or you have to move it on to a rehabilitator within so much time.

Sharon Schmalz [01:49:22] And so, I love the program. I think it's amazing, how much they learn, and how much they learn about shelter medicine. They really never thought about, a lot of never thought about going into being a veterinarian for Houston SPCA or Humane Society or something. So, it's a great opportunity for us and for them. And, you know, it's just one of my favorite parts.

Sharon Schmalz [01:49:47] But I love all the education stuff, because if there's ever an answer, education is it, it's how we're going to get it done. And so, whatever we can convey to them and teach them, they can convey to their clients, too. Right? That "No, you can't keep it. Oh, you have a squirrel at home now. You can't do that. You know, it's against the law."

Sharon Schmalz [01:50:06] So, you know, it's just one more way of spreading that information and hopefully that love for wildlife.

David Todd [01:50:15] Yes.

David Todd [01:50:16] Well, another question about education. I understand that some of these animals that can't be released become Education Ambassadors. And I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about how that program works and the sort of impact you think it has.

Sharon Schmalz [01:50:35] Yeah. We have a great education team, and it's mainly composed of volunteers. We have a lot of volunteers that work with our education animals, and we do training with them. But they go out to schools, they go to nature centers.

Sharon Schmalz [01:50:53] I was trying to find the numbers we did this year. So, yeah, so, just this year we've done over 53 programs, educational programs, and we reached over 12,000 adults and children. So, that's amazing.

Sharon Schmalz [01:51:06] And so, when we go out to the schools, we have some animals that were unreleasable. So, we really evaluate them to see, are these animals going to do well in captivity? Because like I talked about earlier, certain species don't do as well in captivity as others. And so, one of my favorites that we have, um, is a crested caracara. It's kind of an unusual animal. They're moving their range further and further up in Texas.

Sharon Schmalz [01:51:39] But there were two eggs and they were in a nest on top of a transmission tower, an electrical tower. And it was starting to start fires. And so, one of the people that works with CenterPoint Energy, called us and he said, "You know, we've gotten permission from U.S. Fish and Wildlife. We need to get these, we need to move that nest. You know, we've got to take it down. It's already caused an outage. And now part of the nest caught on fire, and it's just become too, too dangerous."

Sharon Schmalz [01:52:12] And so, they went up and got them and brought us. And there were only two eggs in it. They hadn't hatched. So, we put them in our incubator thinking, you know, they're probably, who knows if they're going to really hatch. And sure enough, one day when I'm walking by and I'm like, "There's a bird in there, you know, it looks like a little bitty caracara."

Sharon Schmalz [01:52:30] And it was. So, one of them hatched. And, so we had him since he was an egg. And unfortunately, when he hatched, he had a deformed foot. And so, we tried, the veterinarians tried all kinds of different boots and all kinds of things to straighten the foot out. But it never did straighten out properly that he could really, you know, perch well and get food and stuff.

Sharon Schmalz [01:52:55] So, we got permission from Texas Park and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife, to keep him for education. And so, he goes to all kinds of programs, and honestly, he doesn't know anybody but us, so, I mean, he just thinks he's part of the team, right? So he does very, very well.

Sharon Schmalz [01:53:12] And then we have a, let's see, what was the other bird I was going to talk about. We have a great horned owl and a red-tailed hawk. The red-tailed hawk we've had since we opened the Center. We've had him about 16 years. And he was hit by a car and had a bad wing, and he was an adult. But he's actually, you know, their personality, the way red-tailed hawks are is a little more laid-back. And he's very, very, he's adapted quite well to education.

Sharon Schmalz [01:53:42] And then we have a Harris' hawk. And he was, found in Corpus, and a farmer hit a tree, and they fell out, and one of the young birds died, and this one had a fractured clavicle. And so when we got him, there was nothing we could do for it, but he was already pretty, you know, used to people. And he can fly, but he can't get lift.

Sharon Schmalz [01:54:06] So, we have permission to keep him. And we take him to schools.

Sharon Schmalz [01:54:15] Yeah, those are the main ones. And we have a screech owl. We have a screech owl - it's unreleasable - that we take to schools and stuff.

Sharon Schmalz [01:54:20] And there have been, you know, several years ago when I went to a school that was I mean, I had to be escorted by police. It was kind of one of those schools where, you know, not many people go in to do programs. And I probably didn't realize just how what I was getting into.

Sharon Schmalz [01:54:37] But it was interesting because when I went in there, I took out the animals. And at first, there was rowdiness and stuff, and I'm like, "Look, I can't take them out. If we can't respect them, I can't take them out. You know, I'll just talk to you. But I would love to share these with you and let you see them and everything."

Sharon Schmalz [01:54:54] And so they did. They quieted down, and I was able to do my talk. And, I mean, I took out several animals and walked around and showed them. And when I left, the teachers are like, "Can you come back tomorrow? They've never been that quiet." And I said, "I would love to take credit for it, but it was the animals. They were just mesmerized by them."

Sharon Schmalz [01:55:13] Well, you know, you think about it, that these are kids that probably never really saw a lot of wildlife. But just to sit there and some would just stare at them. And it was really, to me, it was like, it made my heart feel so good, you know. And I told them afterwards, you know, thank you, thank you for showing that respect to them. And I hope one day people show you that respect, too.

Sharon Schmalz [01:55:36] And I think that's what it's all about - you know, respecting wildlife, respecting animals, respecting each other. I think it all goes hand in hand.

David Todd [01:55:45] I love the way you put that.

David Todd [01:55:47] Well, so I have just one more question. So I understand that a lovely woman, Brooke Yahne, will be taking over your role as executive director in the near future. And I'm wondering how you feel about that transition and how you let go of something that you clearly love and, you know, helped birth. How do you do that?

Sharon Schmalz [01:56:16] Yeah, I would say it is a little tricky, you know? But I've known Brooke for ten years. You know, we've worked together. I see that burning desire to take care of wildlife in her, as I saw in me, you know, when I was much younger. And, I think she'll do a great job. But, I mean, I'm still going to be involved. They still want me as like a consultant or just, you know, helping any way I can.

Sharon Schmalz [01:56:46] But I know sometimes I'm like, you know, I'm good with this. I feel good about everything. And then some days I'm like, well, wait, there's just want more thing I know. So.

Sharon Schmalz [01:56:55] But, you know, it is a little hard and I think, but I'm just, I'm happy that we have her and that she's been there ten years. And, you know, the volunteers really like her. And so there is, you know, a continuation in the future.

Sharon Schmalz [01:57:14] And, one more great thing about the Houston SPCA is they're never going to let it fall. They're there to support it, to support wildlife, you know, however and whenever they can. And so they're going to, you know, help support Brooke too in any kind of need, and, you know, wanting me to continue to help as much as I can too.

Sharon Schmalz [01:57:36] So, it is kind of a weird feeling, though.

David Todd [01:57:42] It sounds like a good team that you've built here.

Sharon Schmalz [01:57:45] Yeah.

David Todd [01:57:46] Well, that's all on my side, but I was wondering if there's anything that you'd like to add, something that maybe we just skipped over, neglected to discuss that you think would be important to include.

Sharon Schmalz [01:58:01] You know, I don't think so. I mean, I think we covered a lot. It's hard to believe this is over forty years, right? You know, I've been very lucky and very fortunate to have been able to do this for forty years. And it's been, you know, one of my... I mean, people are like, "Wow, that's a job. You get to do that as a job?" I'm like, "Yeah. Well, I did it for 25 years without a job. It was more just volunteer. But now I actually get paid."

Sharon Schmalz [01:58:37] And so, it's been great to be able to do this and hopefully Patti Mercer and I, with the Houston SPCA, have started a model too, because I think it's showing how this partnership can work and how, you know, and there's other, you know, wildlife rehabilitation centers across the country that are just struggling, you know, and so, you know, being able to have some help and some force behind you. I mean, it's still a struggle. We're still a non-profit.

Sharon Schmalz [01:59:14] But, you know, I think it just shows that sometimes you get to step out of that comfort zone because there was a little, you know, like, how is this going to work? But it worked great.

David Todd [01:59:24] Well. Not, without a lot of hard work, I'm sure.

David Todd [01:59:29] So, thank you very much.

Sharon Schmalz [01:59:32] Thank you.

David Todd [01:59:33] Sharon, this has been really pleasant for me. And, wonderful things to learn and to store and share. So thank you very much.

Sharon Schmalz [01:59:41] Yeah. Thank you. I appreciate your interest.

David Todd [01:59:44] Oh, well, I enjoyed hearing about your life and career and all these good things that you've worked on. So thank you.

David Todd [01:59:53] With that, I may just turn off our recording here and, let you go back to your normal life.

Sharon Schmalz [02:00:00] Okay.

David Todd [02:00:01] All right.

Sharon Schmalz [02:00:02] Sounds good. Well, if there's anything, when you look at it, you want to change or anything, just let me know. Okay?

David Todd [02:00:08] Well, I think you did a great job. Thank you so much.

Sharon Schmalz [02:00:11] Thank you. Bye bye.

David Todd [02:00:13] Bye.