

CROW Case Of The Week:

Baby Bat

by Emilie Alfino

Diane Thomas of South Fort Myers didn't know what she had found in front of her house after a windy day took down a bunch of dead palm fronds. "We always find birds in there and I never disturb them," Thomas said. This time she found a young bird and left it where she thought the mother might return to care for it. When that didn't happen, she returned to the spot and heard chirping noises coming from the nearby culvert less than an arm's length away. "I reached in and felt a bunch of fur. It wasn't moving and I turned it over and saw a dead mother bat with three babies clinging to her. One baby was deceased. I noticed something poking up underneath the mother, pushing on her with their hands."

Thomas took her charges to the Coral Veterinary Clinic as she knew they transported animals to CROW. "I think the mother bat got blown out of the tree," she said. "Some little birds were blown out, too. It was very windy."

The two surviving baby bats arrived at CROW June 1 on an adult female who was deceased. The babies were clinging onto the mother bat. They weighed 2.9 grams, about the weight of two tissues. "They were the size of the end of my thumb, their eyes were closed, and they had very little fur," said Dr. Amber.

They were a little bit cold but otherwise their body condition was pretty good, according to Dr. Amber; they were pink and not too dehydrated. "I think mom had just died from some trauma," she said, which is consistent with Thomas' story of how she found them.

The tiny creatures were northern yellow bats, which are light in color. They grow to dark brown with yellow highlights. They also love to roost in Spanish moss, which caused a bit of a problem in the recovery, as you'll see.

They were given .15 milliliters of subcutaneous fluids. "We offered them fluids via a syringe with a tiny nipple and they took that pretty well," Dr. Amber added.

Because the patients were so tiny, Dr. Amber took them home that first night so they could have an overnight feeding and another at 5:30 a.m. This is the usual practice when the clinic receives mammals so young their eyes are still closed.

The hard part was keeping them warm enough. "They didn't always want to lie on the heating pad," she said. "They wanted to climb to the top of the plastic aquarium." A washcloth had been placed over the side of the aquarium so the babies would have a vertical substance to cling to. This is where the bats' habit of roosting in Spanish moss interfered somewhat with keeping the babies warm. "Mom normally goes out at night to feed and at that time the babies would climb into the moss for cover and warmth," Dr. Amber explained. This took them off the heating pad.

Sadly, one of the babies was lost that first night. Dr. Amber speculated it may have suffered the same trauma as the mother even though it didn't show.

On the second day, clinic staff increased the percentage of milk in the diluted formula being fed to the surviving baby. He did very well and was a champ at nursing.

Anyone caring for a mammal this young has to be extremely careful not to give it too much liquid food too fast. The danger is the possibility of sucking some of it down into the lungs. This takes a lot of time and patience.

Staff Rehabilitator Nicky Talianko and Dr. Amber split duties as to who would take the baby bat home each night. "And then we just kept going," Dr. Amber said. "We fed him essentially as much as he wanted, .3 milliliters at a time, which is still not very much." Even so, he started putting on weight and soon got up to 4.9 grams, a significant increase from his 2.9 gram weight upon arrival.

The little guy was at the CROW clinic for 10 days, a long time for a bat according to Dr. Amber.

At this point, the clinic was able to get in touch with a friend of CROW who works with Bat World in the Everglades and asked if she would be interested in taking over the continued care of the baby bat. "We felt our little guy would be better off at that facility," Dr. Amber said.

"We have so many patients and this little guy's care was so labor intensive, I felt he would be better served with her. And I also felt he needed to be with other bats. We knew he would be in very good hands down there. As far as I know, he's doing well."

Dr. Amber added, "That's the nice part of other rehab centers – they're willing to give and take."

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a non-profit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to PO Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Call 472-3644 or visit: www.crowclinic.org.



Above and below, baby bat being fed

