



■ BATS

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At that time, there were no veterinarians in Yankton taking on wildlife and Messner decided to try her hand at the eagles, beavers, and other animals that the local wildlife officials needed help with.

"We take everything—opossums, raccoons, whatever," she said. "Bats have a special place in my heart, but we take care of everything."

So, where did this love of bats come from?

Messner's initial involvement with bats was related to testing for rabies, but even then, they sparked her compassion.

"Less than half of 1 percent of bats has rabies, whereas 4 percent of cats have rabies," Messner said. "And cats are very aggressive when they have rabies, while a rabid bat will usually just curl up and die."

She would take in bats that others found and send them to be cared for by Bat World Sanctuary founder Amanda Lollar in Mineral Wells, Texas. Then, in 2010, someone in Vermillion found a one-inch baby bat on the floor of their apartment. It was winter, so it wasn't safe sending the bat to Texas, and through Lollar's guidance, Messner learned how to rear the baby.

"It was quite an interactive, little creature. It would turn its head this way and that way, following me with his eyes as I moved, and covering its face with its wings when it got scared," she said. "It

had such an understanding about it. It was like a dog with a monkey brain and not at all what I thought they were—mice with wings. I learned I had to really temper myself, because they get scared easily."

Messner has been taking care of bats on her own ever since. At one point, she had an opportunity to take a class at the Texas sanctuary, spending two weeks of 14-hour days with Lollar's bats. At the time, there were 350 bats in the hospital, plus a 50,000-number wild colony.

"She had some large bats from Jamaica," Messner said. "One was the size of a cat, and most were the size of a small hawk. One of them was hand-raised, and it fluttered in front of me like a butterfly and then landed on my head and put its wings on the sides of my head. Bats are very gentle and misunderstood creatures. I've only had one grumpy bat in all these years, and it was because he was scared."

But bats aren't meant to be pets. Messner cares for them with the goal that they can be released back to the wild. She only keeps the bats that could not survive on their own.

"The only reason I have them is because people know I'll take care of them, everyone from the grocery store to church," she said.

But perhaps because they are so in need of an advocate on their behalf—that while she enjoys caring for each patient that comes through the doors of the Yankton Veterinary Clinic, whether wild or domestic—Messner especially looks forward to her bats.

"My dad would always say, 'I don't care what you do with your life, just do it the best you can,'" she said. "What we all need is someone who believes in us no matter what, like my dad did for me, and I like to think that's what I'm doing for the bats."

■ By Rita Brbel

■ Photos by Ang Pechous

Did You Know?

Bats can only begin flight by gliding off of something high off the ground. So if you see a bat on the ground, it's not necessarily hurt, it may just be trying to get somewhere to be able to climb up to a point where it can fly away.

But don't touch a wild bat with your bare hands. They are wild animals, and will be scared and therefore could bite. It's best to call wildlife authorities to retrieve the bat, or to use a stick to transport the bat to somewhere safe. Bats found indoors can be trapped in a box and then released outside. Bats that are obviously injured, that don't act normally and could be ill, or are very young should go to a sanctuary.

More information can be found at BatWorld.org or by contacting Messner at 605-665-2107.



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