

**HOME IS WHERE
THE WILD THINGS ARE**

A LOOK AT COASTAL WILDLIFE

**Book XI
Marine Discovery Series**

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Written by

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HOME IS WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

A Look at Coastal Wildlife

The morning broke brightly as Caoilte (pronounced Keltee) Lynn McLaurin stretched and blinked her eyes awake. The fresh fragrance of spring blew softly through the open window of her newly painted bedroom...her very own room. Caoilte and her family had moved only two months ago from New Orleans into this new house in a recently developed subdivision on Biloxi's Back Bay.

Caoilte lay back on her pillow and thought about her life in the city and now here. It was quieter, calmer, but, she thought, it is still strange--not quite home yet.

Suddenly Caoilte's attention was drawn to the constant barking of her Scottish terrier, Allister. Glancing at her alarm clock, she realized it was an hour earlier than her normal time to get up. Allister's barking must have awakened her, and she wondered why he sounded so upset.

Now fully awake, Caoilte jumped out of bed and quickly pulled on her blue jeans and sneakers. Tucking her nightgown into her jeans as she ran down the stairs, she almost collided with her mother as she entered the kitchen.

"What's all the excitement about, Miss 'K'?" Her mother teased with a smile.

"Allister's barking at something in the backyard, and he won't stop. I was going out to see what it is," Caoilte replied racing out the back door. Mrs. McLaurin turned back to the stove, shaking her head.

In less than five seconds, Caoilte burst back through the door, breathless, with Allister squirming in her arms. "Mother, come quickly. It's a little animal of some kind. He's just a little ball of fur, and I'm afraid Allister has hurt him. I don't know what it is...Oh, please come quickly! I'll put Allister up so he won't bother him."

Mrs. McLaurin quickly turned off the stove, and drying her hands on the kitchen towel, she hurried after Caoilte to the corner of their fenced backyard.

As mother and daughter bent down over the little creature Mrs. McLaurin said; "Let me see if I can move it into the house, and we'll take a look." Scooping it up gently, Mrs. McLaurin placed it carefully in her apron.

When they got back inside, Caoilte exclaimed; "Mother, it's bleeding! What are we going to do?"

"Well, first I think we should put it in the cardboard box that we saved under the stairwell. Get some old T-shirts out of the rag box, and let's arrange them in the box so that it will have a soft place to lie," Mrs. McLaurin replied.

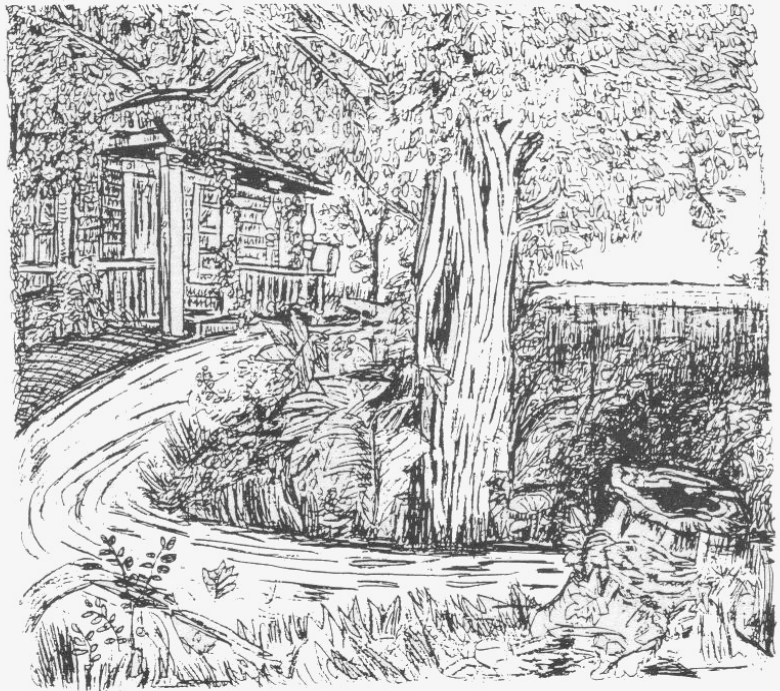
Caoilte's face suddenly brightened. "Mother! I know what we can do. Old Miss Ada lives close by. She knows a lot about animals. I'll take it to her on the way to school. She'll know what to do."

"Good idea," nodded Mrs. McLaurin.

Caoilte quickly went upstairs to get dressed. Ten minutes later she was back in the kitchen, looking at the small little creature with great concern. After drinking her orange juice and grabbing a piece of raisin toast, Caoilte kissed her mother goodbye, and, carefully lifting the box, she hurried out the door.

The way to Miss Ada's house was not known by everyone in the Bay Oaks subdivision. However, most of the kids who lived there knew. There was a real mystery about Miss Ada, and it was always just a little scary to go to the old, but sturdy, unpainted **clapboard house** in the middle of a large woods, which overlooked the bay.

It was said that Miss Ada would just not sell her land to the developers for any amount of money. She loved her woods, the moss-draped oaks, the ferns, the **bogs**, and even the big **salt marsh** that stretched out like a fan in front of her porch. There were many dead trees, and always a considerable number of birds, rabbits, foxes, and other animals that could be glimpsed if you were quiet enough. Some of the neighborhood children said they had even seen a deer once or twice. Quite **unceremoniously** then, Miss Ada, her old log and clapboard house, and the big woods existed altogether...right in the middle of the subdivision.



Caoilte walked briskly down the path, being careful not to jar the precious contents of the box. She soon spotted the house through the undergrowth and suddenly had a strange feeling of being watched. She had just reached the steps when a soft, crackly voice spoke. "What have you got, young lady?"

Caoilte spun around to see an old but kind face peering out of the huckleberry bushes on the side of the house. "I'm not sure," Caoilte replied. "My dog had it cornered in the backyard this morning. I think it's hurt."

"Well, let's get it inside and take a look." Miss Ada gently took the box and shuffled up the steps to the porch.



Upon entering the house, Caoilte looked around with amazement. There were all kinds of natural things here and there. Old vines were draped over the windows; and carefully arranged the fireplace mantle were dried flowers and mushrooms, a few bird feathers, and an old bird's nest. There were **gnarled** pieces of driftwood, a turtle's old shell, some kind of animal's skull, strange rocks with the imprint of ancient sea creatures that she recognized from her science class as being fossils, shells, and Indian arrowheads. All these natural things had been dried, discarded by the original animal owner, or just picked up along the shore. Caoilte was sure that Miss Ada would never harm a creature; she just enjoyed the beauty of the natural form of things that existed around her. Caoilte saw these things in that way, too, as she looked around with curious eyes.

Miss Ada bent over the box. "It's a baby raccoon, young lady. See the small dark rings around its tail? We need to keep it very quiet in this cardboard box. I'll put it in the front

room away from everything. Any kind of noise can upset him. I'll also put a hot-water bottle in the box so he can warm up. I'll mix and warm some sugar water with a dash of salt to give him with an eye-dropper. I can tell he is thirsty, but we can't give him any milk right away. It would upset his stomach."

"What about the cut on his leg, Miss Ada?" Caoilte questioned.

"I'll put some salve on it," she replied. "Perhaps you should go on to school now. You can stop by on your way home and see how he is. I'll take care of him today."

That day in school, Caoilte could hardly keep her mind on her work thinking about the little baby raccoon. Finally, during science class, Caoilte raised her hand and described her experience that morning to the class and Mrs. Armstrong.

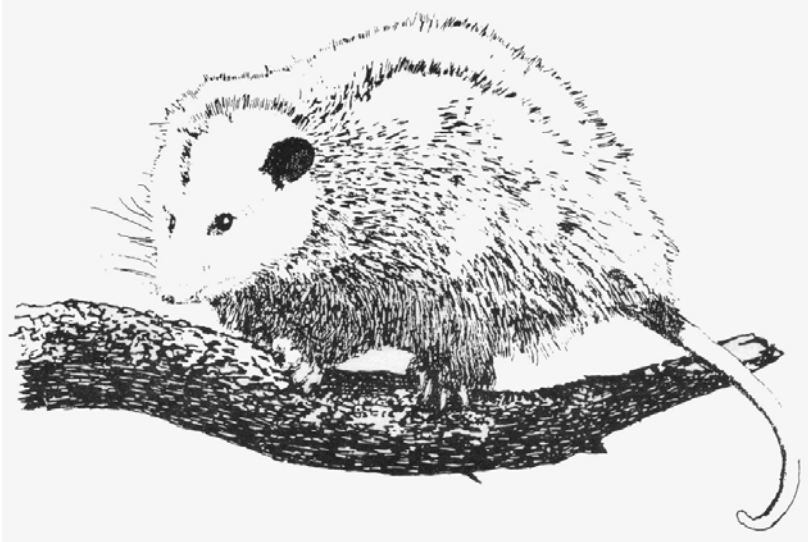
"Well, class," Mrs. Armstrong spoke after Caoilte had finished, "Caoilte has been through an experience that many of you are likely to have. Perhaps some of you have already have found a baby bird or an injured animal. You see, Caoilte lives in a new subdivision that has been developed only in the past year. In the last 40 years populations in coastal areas have increased by 50%. It seems everyone wants to live near the coastline. Before Bay Oaks was subdivided into lots for homes and cleared, it was a very thickly wooded area and many animals had their homes and lived there just like Caoilte does now. The only problem is that almost all of the homes that the animals lived in are gone.

"There are no more tall grasses, briar thickets, or even dead trees. Which animal use as homes. They also need **understory**, that is the plants that grow close to the ground, to shelter them and provide food. most of the trees and understory are gone now in the subdivision replaced by houses and large lawns that provide no shelter or food.

"The mother raccoon was probably trying to move her baby to a safe den when Allister ran her off, and she dropped the baby. Trying to cross fenced yards to find food and shelter is very difficult for wildlife, but many animals try to live in the same area as humans because those areas are familiar to them. Can any of you think of wild animals that may live in developed areas with us?"



"I saw an opossum the other night eating from my cat's dish," spoke up Johnny Polcavich.



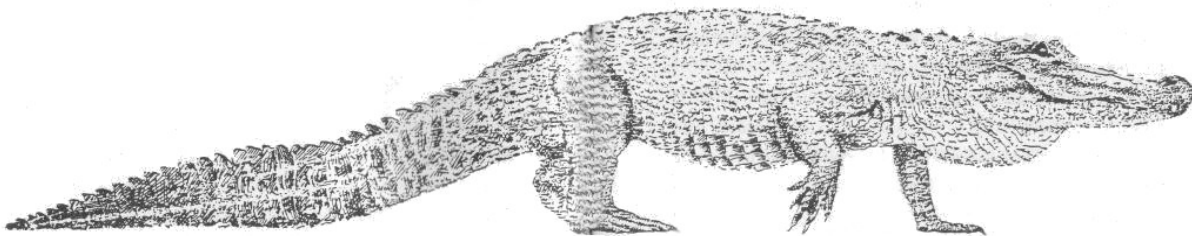
"Yes, and we have squirrels and birds that come to our bird feeder," said Linda Presley.

"I found a baby bird on the ground one day," spoke up James Englehart. "We called the zoo and they explained that we must put the baby back into its nest. They said that it was not true that if you touch a baby bird the parents will

abandon it. They also said that many birds leave the nest when they are learning to fly, even though they cannot fly very well and often hop about on the ground while the parents feed it and teach it to fly. Well, the parents came right down to the baby bird when we put it back in its nest. I think we should never take a baby animal from its mother and father."

"You see, many wild animals are still trying to carry on their daily lives of eating and raising their young, but they are coming to depend more and more on humans as their own **habitat** is lost. Do you know what 'habitat' is?" Mrs. Armstrong continued. "It is the quality of land and vegetation that supports populations of species. We still do see some animals in developed areas but not as many or not as many different kinds as would occur if we did not clear the land s we do. Solving the problem of habitat for both man and the animals is so important to prevent **extinction**, or destruction, or species. We depend on a balance of all creatures to have a healthy planet, even poisonous snakes and things we may think are a nuisance. Something else may depend on these things for their survival."

Karen Busch spoke up, "We have an alligator in the canal in back of our house, and mother and dad say that we need to get rid of it."



"Well, Karen, even alligators have an important role in our **ecosystem**," replied Mrs. Armstrong. "They are an important natural **predator**, which protects the balance of

the marsh. Most alligators are afraid of people. However, we must never feed them as they will lose their fear which could be dangerous to people and pets.

"Now, about the baby raccoon--I know Caoilte was very concerned about this helpless little creature, but often it is better to bring any pets that you may have indoors and wait and watch the wild animal from a distance. In most cases, wild babies are not **orphaned**, and the mother will come back and get her baby if nothing threatens her. The baby should simply be protected from harm until the mother returns. However, Caoilte, in this case the baby was injured by your dog, and you did the right thing by calling an adult to help you and by putting it in a cardboard box on soft rags until you could take it to the proper authority. We must remember that all wildlife are protected by law, and it is **illegal**, or against the law, to possess them without written permission from the state wildlife conservation department.

"If you find an injured or truly orphaned wild animal, you should immediately contact a wildlife **rehabilitator**, who is **licensed** and trained to care for injured and orphaned wildlife. A rehabilitator has been trained to provide the proper nutrition and to give emergency care that will more likely ensure that the animal survives and can be released safely back into the wild. No animal belongs in a cage, as it is a jail to them, and they frequently suffer great **misery** when they cannot be free as they were meant to be. Can you imagine being kept in your room for a month, or even a week, not being able to see any of your friends or family? Many animals have been kept this way for years."

"Oh, I think that would be a terrible way to live," said Michael Johnson.

"If we truly love animals, we must treat them with respect and do what is right for them," Mrs. Armstrong continued.

"I think I'll call the Wildlife Center and ask for their assistance when I get home," Caoilte responded.

Later that afternoon Caoilte, her mother, and old Miss Ada drove to the Wildlife Center with the injured raccoon. The afternoon was sunny and warm. The leaves in the trees were new and bright green, and wild flowers were blooming everywhere. But as they left the beach highway and turned down a wooded lane, Caoilte's thoughts were focused on the baby raccoon.

She had never really seen any wild animals up close like this before, and she marveled at the baby's soft downy fur and its helpless ness. Were there really a lot of wild animals on the coast? She had often just thought of the beach as sand, although she knew that the marsh was good for fishing. Her Uncle Herbert had taken her fishing before, and they always seemed to catch more near the marsh, a place that seemed more water than land.

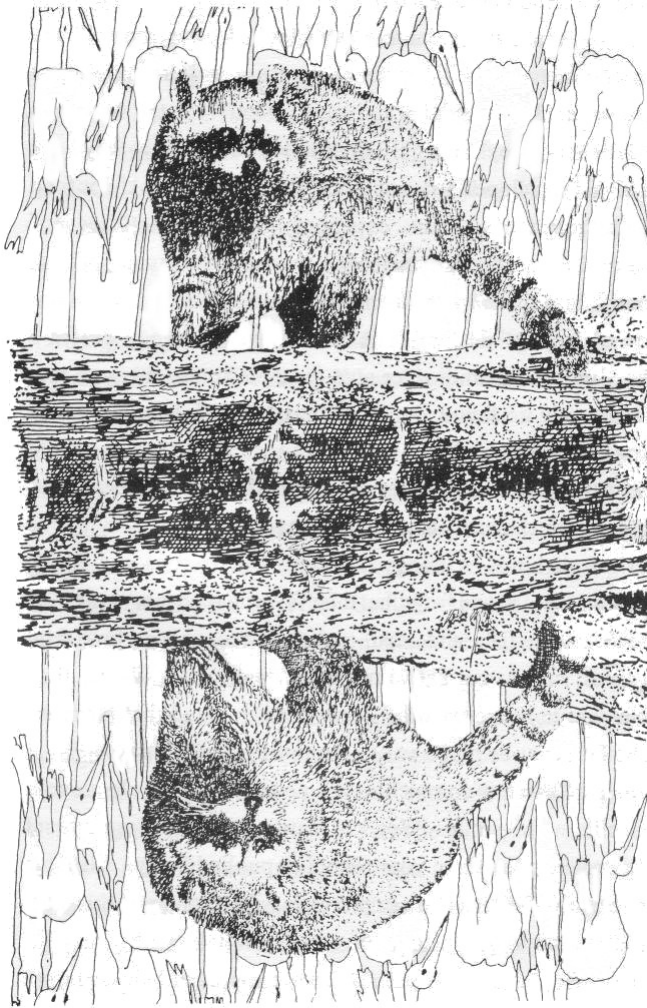
As they pulled into the Wildlife Center parking area, a wildlife **volunteer** met them and led them to the clinic building. Inside Caoilte saw a table and led them to the

clinic building. Inside Caoilte saw a table with a stainless steel top and scales. There was a desk and a lot of books. There were shelves with all kinds of medicines, bandages, and charts. In the back corner there were large cans full of different kinds of animal feeds. A refrigerator stood against the wall, and another volunteer was retrieving something to give to a bird that was in a cardboard box against another wall. As a matter of fact, there were many boxes with towels draped over them and Caoilte wondered what was in them. There was even a clear container with shiny, dry worms in it that someone said were **mealworms** which were to be fed to the insect-eating mammals and birds along with the basic staple diet fed during their stay at the center.

After the baby raccoon was given to another volunteer for a physical examination, the man sat at the desk with some forms and started asking questions. Caoilte learned that each animal admitted to the center must be logged in, that is, the center records the circumstances under which the animal was found. The man wrote on a form the date the baby raccoon was brought to the center, where it was found, and what seemed to be wrong with it. Mrs. McLaurin also gave her name, their address, and telephone number. The man said that this information was necessary because a detailed report about each animal must be sent to the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** and the **Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks** each year.

The volunteer then took Caoilte to the room where the baby raccoon was being examined. The baby was weighed and given more liquid especially mixed for babies, which would keep it from becoming **dehydrated**. It was placed back in the cardboard box, and one-half of the box was placed on a heating pad set on low. The baby could crawl away from the source of the heat if he got too warm. A few seconds later another volunteer gave the baby a drop or two of an **antibiotic** which would keep it from getting sick from its wound, cleaned the leg wound, and applied some antibiotic **salve**. When Caoilte remarked that the Wildlife Center was almost like going to a hospital, the volunteer said that a person must take course to learn about the proper method of carrying for wildlife. A **veterinarian** often looks at the animals and does the more technical work that a doctor would do. He often also shows the volunteers what medications to give and what care should be given. Caoilte was glad to know that the baby raccoon and the other animals at the center were cared for by people who were well trained.

Caoilte was told that as soon as the baby healed, it would be placed with other raccoons and raised so that it would keep its "**wildness**" and could be released back into the wild again. Caoilte knew it was important for it to be with other raccoons, just as she knew it was important to go to school and be with other children. She also knew that the baby raccoon would be happier, snuggled up to another baby raccoon, and that they could play together and grow up as normally as an orphan could without a mother to teach it.



Janna, the volunteer who looked after most of the raccoons, told Caoilte more about these **unique**, intelligent creature. Janna said that raccoons are **native** to the American continent. They are highly **tactile** creatures; that is they have a highly developed sense of touch; they almost "look" for food with their hands. Janna explained that the name "raccoon" comes from the American Indian name "arakuan," which translate to mean "he who scratches with his hands." Raccoons spend a great deal of time around water. They prefer a **hardwood** stream or river area for their home, although raccoons may be found in almost any kind of habitat such as coastal marshes and even mountains or deserts. They prefer old dead trees for their **dens**, which is a good reason why dead trees in forests and marshy areas should be **preserved**. Raccoons like to eat all kinds of things including wild berries and fruits, acorns, insects, and frogs, but their favorite

food is **crustaceans** such as crawfish, and small crabs. Raccoons also love wild grapes, such as our native **muscadines**, because, like us, they have quite a sweet tooth. Janna further stated that raccoons should never be given sweets **unnatural** to their diet.

"There is so much to tell about raccoons," Janna told Caoilte with a smile. "You can learn a lot about raccoons and other wild animals in your school or public library. Also, we have at the Center some pamphlets on wild creatures in this area; I'll be glad to give you some of these to take with you. But remember," Janna warned. "Wild animals, even baby ones, are no pets. They seldom **adapt** well to a house and human family, nor should they be caged."

"No," Caoilte agreed, "I wouldn't want to find this baby raccoon climbing the curtains or eating out of the cereal boxes, and I wouldn't want to keep him locked up either. I understand that we should help wild animals stay wild."

"So, Caoilte, you also understand how we can be most kind to our raccoon friends by letting a licensed rehabilitator raise orphaned raccoons to be wild and free."

The door to the treatment room opened. "Oh, hi, Amanda," Janna greeted the woman who entered the room. "This young lady is Caoilte. She brought in this injured raccoon this afternoon." Janna turned to Caoilte. "Miss Amanda Atwood is the director of the center," she explained. Caoilte noticed a small cloth bag in Amanda's hand; there was something moving inside of it. The director saw the puzzled look on Caoilte's face.

"Caoilte, guess what is in this bag."

Caoilte shook her head; "I don't have a clue," she said, her eyes fixed on the bag. Gently, Amanda set the bag on the examining table and loosened the top. "It's a bird," Caoilte whispered.

"A screech owl to be exact, one that needs to be weighed. Putting it in a soft cloth bag and weighing it, bag and all, is the best way to do it."

"Are there other animals here too besides the owl and the bird that was being fed?" Caoilte asked.



"And this raccoon?" Interjected Janna with a chuckle.

"Many animals of all kinds," Amanda told her. "Would you like to follow me as I check in on the animals this afternoon?"

"Oh, I'd love to," Caoilte **enthused**. "Can Mom and Miss Ada come too?"

"Of course," the director smiled.

The director led them out of the main Center building to a thinly wooded area to the back. There she showed Caoilte, her mother, and Miss Ada the special habitat confinement areas built to keep wild animals safe while they were getting well. Many enclosures had one-way glass so that the animals could be checked on without disturbing them. She showed them a pileated woodpecker that had encountered **pesticide** spray, an opossum that had been hit by a car, a red-tailed hawk whose legs had been injured by a **steel trap**, and a litter of baby skunks whose mother had been killed by a dog. Saddest of all was a beautiful blue heron that had almost starved when the plastic rings from soft drink cans had tangled around his head and beak.



"There is an abundance of wildlife on the Gulf Coast," Amanda pointed out, "because the abundance of water and wetlands and the variety of food in this **diverse** habitat creates an ideal **environment** for many life forms. But continued problems with humans will eventually kill off many of our native animals." Amanda pointed to one confinement area. "Look in there Caoilte," she said.

"What a beautiful bird," Caoilte exclaimed.

"That is a Mississippi Sandhill Crane," Amanda explained. "It is an **endangered** species, that is, there are very few left. This one was found injured in a ditch not far from the refuge. You see, sandhill cranes are native only to Jackson County on the Gulf Coast and do not migrate. Because of increasing loss of pine bog habitat, due to development, the birds did not have as many places to nest. Some animals have great difficulty adapting to changes in their habitat. The crane populations have been steadily decreasing and that is why it is so important that we **preserve** as much habitat for them and other endangered species as possible." Caoilte and the others agreed that it would sure be sad if we could not see many of these animals in the future.

Caoilte was thrilled when reentering the clinic, she observed a great horned owl feeding babies on a closed-circuit television monitor. "This adult owl was illegally shot, and unfortunately not able to return to the wild," explained Amanda. "However, she makes a very good foster parent to orphaned owls brought to the center."

There was so much Caoilte wanted to know. She began to feel how important it was for people to know about the Coast's wildlife and how to avoid hurting them. Then she got an idea. "Do people from the Center ever talk to school classes?" She asked the director.

"Caoilte, I or one of the volunteers here would be happy to come to your school and talk to your class about wildlife and wildlife **conservation**. Just have your teacher call me here at the center to arrange a time."

"Will you bring some of the animals?"

"Perhaps I could arrange that too," the director nodded.

"A raccoon would be perfect," Caoilte assured her.

Amanda did come to Caoilte's science class and brought several animals along with a baby raccoon. The young people touched its soft fur and felt its tiny, soft almost human "hands." She explained how wildlife habitat was being turned into shopping centers, highways, subdivisions, and resorts. She told them ways that animals and people could use the same or nearby areas successfully without endangering the survival of native species.

At lunch, Caoilte and her friends talked about the visit. "I think I'll make sure to clip and properly dispose of those plastic soft drink rings," John said.

"Well, I'll make sure the lid is tight on the garbage cans every evening," Jesse continued.

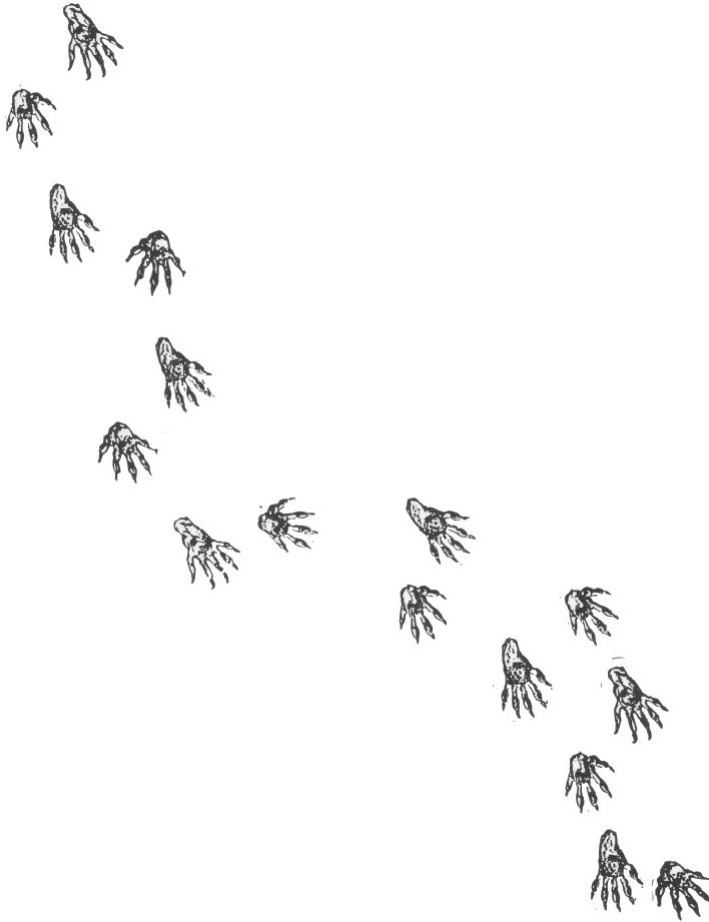
"My family loves to go fishing," Tenecia told the group. "But I'll be sure to remind Dad and Mom not to throw overboard any trash or fishing line."

David suggested; "We can talk with our families about making backyard habitats by planting berry bushes and creating a place for animals to drink." Each young person thought of simple things to protect wildlife that they and their families could do.

Several months later Caoilte got a phone call from Amanda. "The raccoon you brought in is well, Caoilte. I'm going to release him Saturday afternoon about 5:00. Would you like to see how it is done?"

"Would I ever!" Caoilte said. "I'll be there."

That Saturday afternoon, Caoilte and her mother drove to the center. Amanda met them and took them back to the special habitats. "He's grown," Caoilte said excitedly.



"Yes, he has, and his leg has healed nicely." Then Amanda explained quickly what she was going to do and asked Caoilte and her mother to stand back so the raccoon wouldn't get confused. Carefully opening the door, she picked up the youngster and put him in a soft bag. She put the bag in a cardboard box and then led Caoilte and her mother down a path into the woods. When she came to an old dead tree near the creek, she said, "Here is typical raccoon habitat. There is plenty to eat here, though, for the first few days, we will put out increasingly smaller amounts of food as we encourage the youngster to hunt for himself." Then carefully she set the bag on

the ground and opened it. First a furry, ringed tail, then a leathery little "hand," then a bright-eyed masked face appeared through the opening. Like a jack-in-the-box, the little raccoon leaped from the bag and was up in the tree almost before Caoilte knew what happened. He slipped into a hole near the top. Caoilte could just see the tip of his shiny black nose and a bit of grey whisker.

"One happy raccoon," Amanda sighed. "Freedom again."

"Will he be alright?" Caoilte asked as they turned up the path.

"I'm sure he will," Amanda nodded. "We'll keep an eye on him, but he is old enough to make his way just fine as soon as he gets used to being on his own again. And from the looks of things that won't take long," she laughed.

Caoilte looked at the woods around her, the sandy shore just beyond, the patches of blue sky just above her head. "How beautiful it all is; how important to the animals-- and to me!" She thought.

GLOSSARY

ADAPT	To adjust to specified use of situation
ANTIBIOTIC	A drug used in the prevention and treatment of diseases and infections
BOG	Soft, waterlogged ground; a type of wetland
CLAPBOARD HOUSE	A wood frame house
CONSERVATION	Controlled use and protection of natural resources
CRUSTACEANS	A large group of animals with jointed external skeletons; shrimps, crabs, crawfish
DEHYDRATED	A condition that exists when a body has lost too much water
DEN	A wild animal's home
DIVERSE	Containing a large variety of something
ECOSYSTEM	All the organisms present in a particular area, together with their physical environment (habitat)
ENDANGERED	A species that may soon die out if measures are not taken to protect it
ENTHUSED	Said with enthusiasm
ENVIRONMENT	An organism's physical and biological surroundings
EXTINCTION	The destruction of a species
GNARLED	Knotted, twisted
HABITAT	The physical area where an organism lives
HARDWOOD	A broad-leafed, flowering tree
ILLEGAL	Against the law
LICENSED	Allowed by law with written permission
MEALWORM	An immature stage of certain species of beetles
MISERY	Mental or emotional unhappiness; suffering
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE, FISHERIES AND PARKS	The state agency that manages the state's wildlife resources
MUSCADINE	A native grape
NATIVE	Means that something was born in a region rather than coming from another part of the world
ORPHANED	Without parents
PESTICIDE	A chemical used to kill pests
PREDATOR	An animal that captures other animals for food. Predators normally take only the sick and weak animals of a species
PRESERVED	Kept in its natural state

REHABILITATOR	One who helps make an injured or orphaned animal (or person) healthy enough to release back into its natural habitat
SALT MARSH	A low coastal grassland often covered by the tide; a type of wetland
SALVE	A wound dressing to aid in healing
STEEL-JAW TRAP	An anchored clamp-like trap that springs tightly shut on an animal's leg
TACTILE	Sensitive to touch
UNCEREMONIOUSLY	Informally
UNDERSTORY	The lower growing vegetation in a wooded section of land, for example: bushes and small trees
UNIQUE	Being without equal; special
UNNATURAL	Not familiar to a creature
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE	A federal agency that monitors and regulates animal populations and their environments
VETERINARIAN	A medical doctor for animals
WILDNESS	Natural wild behavior

PROJECTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Have the students conduct research about different kinds of wetlands. Why is life so abundant in the wetlands?

Take a field trip to a wetland.

Have students discuss the different ways they can help wildlife.

Create a backyard habitat project.

Build a bluebird house or other kind of animal den.

Require students to locate a dead tree and record their observations.

Discuss an important environmental issue in class and encourage students to write letters expressing their views to congressmen and/or local newspapers.

Start a wildlife observation "club".

RECOMMENDED READING

50 Simple Things Kids Can Do To Save The Earth, published by The Earthworks Group

Going Green: A Kid's Handbook To Saving The Planet, Puffin Books

Crinkleroot's Guide To Walking In Wild Places, Bradbury Press

"Nature Scope" series, published by the Natural Wildlife Federation