



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Molly feeds an injured bird in her Live Oak aviary. Native Animal Rescue hopes to have a permanent home in Corralitos soon.

Animal Shelter

Corralitos couple donates three acres for new Native Animal Rescue home

By **MAY WONG**
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SANTA CRUZ — After years of looking, a local organization that shelters injured or orphaned wild animals may finally have found a permanent home for itself.

Native Animal Rescue, which has been operating without a clinic for 1½ years, has signed a 65-year lease to build a facility on a portion of a 50-plus acre ranch in Corralitos. Sam and Karen Blancato, who run an organic avocado orchard there, will be basically donating more than three acres of the space to NAR, charging the group \$1 a year, or 8 cents a month, for the space.

"The fact that we have a lease is very, very monumental," said Jim Montgomery, a member of the group's board of directors, on Friday. "And it's a real nice, quiet rural setting that is ideal for NAR to treat injured and ill animals. ... It's perfect."

The next step for NAR is securing the necessary permits from the county. Architectural plans are being drawn. The group hopes to submit a plan to the county within a month, Montgomery said. The permit review process is expected to take up to six months. Then maybe, finally, ground could be broken.

"We're very very excited about this," said Morgan Venable, NAR's animal rescue coordinator. "It'll be nice to have that dream facility because then we'll be able to handle the volume of animals needed in Santa Cruz County."

From its beginning in 1980, NAR operated out of a 174-square-foot room at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Seventh Avenue office. The cramped quarters were meant to be a temporary home, but finding a permanent home proved difficult.

Possible sites came and went. For a variety of reasons, none of the locations ever panned out.

Then, in August 1995, a mysterious poison in Monterey Bay sent an unprecedented number of dying sea birds to the NAR clinic. Staff and volunteers found themselves caring for more than 400 birds in two months, working round the clock and running thousands of dollars into debt to buy fish, antibiotics and supplies.

The organization was already pushed to its limit by years of too much work and too little money. There was no room left for other animals; NAR workers reluctantly had to kill a fawn which had been hit by a car but could have lived with some tender loving care.

The clinic shut its doors shortly after.

The board of directors has since reformed to replace the one that disbanded when the center closed. The group has raised more than \$20,000 for a building fund and obtained legislation that will provide state Department of Fish and Game funding for the new rehabilitation center.

It is not clear yet how much the state will be giving NAR, said Montgomery. But the money, which will be

coming in July, is part of a larger allocation for six wildlife rehabilitation centers along the California coast. The money comes from the state oil spill response trust fund, a \$55 million fund raised by a one-time tax on oil brought by tanker or pipeline to California.

NAR will need at least \$200,000 to build the new rehabilitation facility. "That's just to open the door and turn on the lights," Montgomery said.

The Corralitos ranch is on Eureka Canyon Road, less than a mile from Corralitos Market and about 15 minutes from Highway 1. The ranch property, known as "Sugar Hill," includes a natural pond at the crest of a ridge and plenty of trees and open space for aviaries and pools to be built later by NAR.

"We'll be able to handle more animals and we'll be able to utilize more volunteers," said Venable. "It'll allow the general public to help us more in our cause. And we'll be able to rehabilitate a greater variety of animals."

Property owner Blancato said he is looking forward to having NAR as his neighbor.

"They're terrific people," he said. "There's not an evil bone in that whole darn crew."

As far as having creatures around, "you can never have too many," Blancato said. "We do what we can. We love our little critters."

NAR is the only organization in the county with a state Department of Fish and Game permit to run a wildlife rehabilitation operation. In its 17 years of service, the group has res-

cued thousands of sick, injured and orphaned wildlife. Creatures like bobcats and baby blue jays, brown pelicans and foxes have been fed, doctored and cared for until they can be returned to the wild.

With the new facility, Venable said, the group could treat 3,000 animals annually — a thousand more animals than when the NAR clinic was at the SPCA, and double what it could care for today with no clinic at all.

Since the clinic closure, the organization has relied heavily upon a network of caregivers — specialists and licensed volunteers who tend to animals at their homes. Animals have also been sent to wildlife rehabilitation centers in other counties.

Molly, a retired schoolteacher who prefers to go by her first name only, has nursed to health hundreds of birds at her Live Oak home. A NAR volunteer for seven years, she originally cared for sick birds in her living room. She has since converted her laundry room into a bird clinic. She does her laundry at the local laundromat now, as recovering songbirds chirp away in the back of her house.

Molly feeds the birds in 15- to 30-minute intervals, depending on their type. Upon arrival, she hydrates them, gives them antibiotics and sets their wings and legs with tiny splints if they're broken.

"If it were a job, it would be a chore. But for nothing, it's great," Molly said. "Well, sometimes it's more than nothing — the bird will bite me, then leave."

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