

On the Wild Side:

Le Clos de l'Olivier – A Haven in Hard Times

By Clare Abel (GBR – Civ)

Winter is a tough time for wildlife. Whilst we humans ponder whether or not to turn up the central heating in our cosy homes shielded from the wind, rain, cold and darkness; many wild animals are struggling to scrape together enough food to survive day to day. The season forces many animals into closer contact with humans as they search further afield for dwindling food supplies. Fewer hours of daylight also mean less time in which to obtain sufficient nutrition and as the days draw in, life is even more risky for animals near our busy roads. Only recently my husband nearly collided with a young roe deer. With all the hazards of the winter months it is amazing to think that any animals make it through to spring unscathed. Of course many do survive and for those who do end up in trouble help is at hand. Did you know that there is a wildlife sanctuary right on the doorstep of SHAPE called 'Le Clos de l'Olivier'? It is to this centre that I dedicate the remainder of the article.

Le Clos de l'Olivier situated in Masnuy-St-Jéan is a wildlife hospital with all the necessary authorisations for keeping animals protected by the law. It is dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of wildlife in the region as well as those animals passing through. The centre welcomes animals that are injured, sick,



◁Clos de l'Olivier main building.

exhausted or abandoned with the aim of ultimately releasing them back to nature. Since the centre opened in 1998, more than 5000 animals have come through its

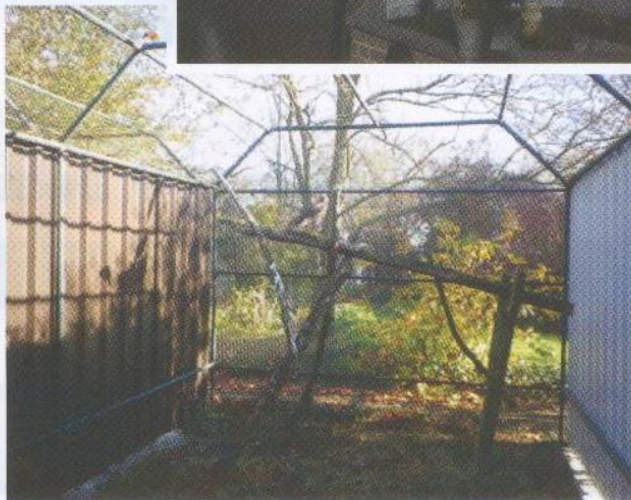
doors. Of this number, 80% have been ringed and released by agents from "La Division de la Nature et des Forêts." Within the remaining 20%, certain animals could not be released but live a happy life nonetheless at the centre and unfortunately the others passed on.

While the centre is predominantly concerned with the rehabilitation of wild animals, it will accept pets for re-housing. A fee is charged for this service. It has also been known to care for exotic birds which have escaped and colonised the wild or have been found abandoned.

It is important to note though, that if you do find a domestic animal in distress, then l'Arche de Noë (<http://users.skynet.be/archedenoe/index.htm>) is a better port of call.

Le Clos de l'Olivier is well-equipped for success with a dedicated non-salaried team comprising: 2 managers, Catrin Imhoff and Daniel Marlier; 4 vets and 5 full-time centre assistants. The centre itself comprises 2 treatments rooms, a specialised room for small mammals, 3 pens for large mammals, numerous aviaries and an area for the rehabilitation of aquatic birds not to mention the accommodation for permanent occupants. Although the centre has a very informative website (<http://www.closdelolivier.be/>) the centre is not open to

the public to prevent unnecessary disturbance to the residents. If you do happen to come across a



△Buzzard in an aviary practising flight.



△Young abandoned hedgehogs.

◁Gannet at le clos.



△Recuperating barn owls.

sick, injured or weak animal though, this is the place to bring them.

So, you find yourself with an injured deer, a stunned bird or a starving hedgehog, what should you do? First off, remember that the animal is wild and normally as a human are considered an enemy so the animal may be afraid or aggressive. Try to make your frame as small as possible as you approach and make gentle noises so that the creature is aware of your presence. Do not be tempted to offer any food or drink as the animal may be in shock. If you are able to bring the animal to the centre yourself, place it in the smallest container possible to prevent it from sliding around. You can cover the creature with a blanket for darkness and warmth. For hedgehogs you will also need a pair of thick gloves as the spines are extremely sharp. If possible, call ahead to le Clos de l'Olivier (the owners do speak some English) to let them prepare for the patient's arrival. It is rare for the staff to come out and collect injured animals themselves, so if you find yourself in a situation with a large animal that you are unable to transport then call the federal police and they will liaise with le Clos.

Once the animal has been admitted, it will be stabilised. Its condition will be assessed and it will be given time to calm down alone in an enclosure. One of the vets will complete a full medical check-up. Any surgery required can be administered on site and follow-up care/medication can be given by the centre's staff. A period of convalescence follows and for injured birds, physiotherapy is often needed to enable them to re-strengthen their flight muscles after broken wings. After time in a larger aviary to enable practice flight, finally the birds are ringed and released back to the wild. In all this process takes on average 12 weeks whether involving birds or mammals although it is dependent upon the severity of the condition and the time of year. The contact with humans is minimal and the residents are never given names as maintaining their wildness is paramount.

So what sorts of residents does the centre house in winter? Daniel Marlier one of the centre's managers told me that the variety of creatures admitted reflects the diversity and the numbers found in nature. Winter time sees the admittance of more weak and injured animals than other times of year. Currently there are a variety of birds of prey such as buzzards and even a peregrine falcon found at SHAPE. There are also several owls including barn owls and tawny owls.

Now is a key time for admitting European hedgehogs as they must have attained a certain weight in order to survive hibernation. Having said that, the last few weeks have been unseasonably warm so any hedgehogs out may simply be taking the opportunity to fatten up a little more. Once the cold weather arrives though, a hedgehog must weigh at least 450g (1lb) to survive. If you find a small looking hedgehog out in



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Clos de l'Olivier a.s.b.l

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the day and the weather is cold then le Clos should be notified. As I saw, there are already several juvenile hedgehogs in residence who could not gain enough weight in time to survive outdoors.

The centre also welcomes more unusual guests from time to time. In the past a pelican and a python have been through its doors. Presently there is a single gannet recuperating after losing his way! Gannets are stunning sea birds that nest on cliff tops.

As le Clos de l'Olivier is a charitable organisation receiving only limited funding from the Region of Wallonia it must source its own finances. The number of animals admitted has increased year upon year since opening and 2011 has seen close to 1200 residents so far. The prices of medication, maintaining the centre, food etc have also increased. Therefore support from the public and companies has never been more important. Donations can be given in the form of money in one off or frequent contributions – Crédit Agricole

103-0205108-21. Food, cages, aviaries, medical materials, building materials and other accessories are also welcome. You can even sponsor an animal or spend your money in the online shop. Whether you choose to donate or not, if you find an animal in distress, you are contributing to the survival of the wildlife on your local patch if you bring it to this special haven – le Clos de l'Olivier.



△Peregrine Falcon rescued from SHAPE.



△Daniel Marlier in the initial treatment room.