

## *Patient Tale: Grampa 'Possum - A Bittersweet Tale*

He arrived late in the evening at the end of July 1996. My friend Terry Cummings of Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary found him on a mulch pile the previous evening. He was an opossum and, judging from the size of his head, I guessed he was at least three-years-old (about 85 in human years).

As I examined the old guy, I marveled that he was still alive. He was the most emaciated creature I had ever seen; literally skin and bones. I explained to Terry that perhaps he might be too far gone to save and perhaps it would be best to put him to sleep. The Terry mentioned that she had given him a can of cat food and he had eaten it. If he had eaten and processed the food, perhaps there was a chance; but was it worth it? He was clearly at the end of his lifespan; there is no cure for old age. The best I could offer Gramps was a pleasant retirement but I told Terry I would give the old guy a try.



*Grampa on admission*

In addition to weighing less than three pounds, the 'possum had several infected toes, an abscess under the left eye that had affected his vision and bot fly maggots in various places on his body. His nose had been split side-to-side, making him look like he had just one large nostril. It appeared that he had been struggling along with his injuries for some time and had simply given up.

We gently cleaned the eye and applied an antibiotic ointment. We began a course of injectable antibiotics, made his as comfortable as we could in a large kennel and served him a nutritious dinner. By the next morning, his dinner bowl had been licked clean and he was resting peacefully.

We continued the antibiotics for a week and his toes were healing nicely. The eye was more of a problem and required daily attention. After about a month, weighing seven pounds, we treated Grampa for internal parasites, which are more or less inevitable in wildlife. I remained astonished that a creature could lose so much weight and still recover with just a little protection and nourishing food. We were all becoming very fond of Grampa; perhaps some of you saw him during our Open House. Our plan was to keep him through the winter and, if he survived, perhaps he could be released in the spring. If not, at least he had a nice retirement home.



*Grampa taking a nap while his cage is being cleaned*

By mid-October, Grampa was a healthy twelve pounds. His wounds had all healed and though the left eye was not functional, it was healed and he was still eating well. I began to think he might make it through the winter and we could release him at SCWC so we could keep an eye on him. Alas, it was not to be; he died peacefully in his sleep the morning of December 10, 1996. Although I knew he was very old, his passing saddened me.

Most of the time, I scold myself for not ending the suffering of an animal that ultimately dies despite our best efforts. In this case, however, I like to think we were able to give Grampa 'Possum a few months of heaven on Earth, free of pain, warm, safe and with a full belly. He is sorely missed.

*by Chris Montuori*