



## A WINTER VISITOR

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He arrived October 23, 1996 from DC Animal Control; a juvenile groundhog that had been found in a ditch. His head was twisted oddly to the side and he was extremely lethargic. His symptoms strongly suggested that he had been hit by a car and had suffered a serious head injury. Since the vegetarian groundhog favors the short grass found next to roads, they often fall victim to our vehicles. We normally treat trauma cases with an anti-inflammatory drug but in the past, we have not had good results using the medication on groundhogs. We decided to give the animal cage rest and hope for the best. One week later, the animal's head was still tilted abnormally, but he was alert and eating. He was also becoming extremely difficult to handle.



Each morning, Second Chance volunteers would work hard cleaning all the animal cages except one. Housed on our side porch, the groundhog was simply too intimidating and the task of removing him from his kennel always fell to me or my one paid staff member, Dave. With heavy gloves and a large towel, we would brave those huge teeth to haul the uncooperative creature from his "den". When the kennel was cleaned and filled with fresh food, the groundhog would be unceremoniously dumped back in from the holding box.

For the next several weeks, the groundhog ate like a true hog: kale, apples, corn, sweet potatoes, and carrots all would disappear in no time. Still, the head twist persisted and winter was approaching. By early December, our 'hog was becoming increasingly lethargic. Could he be developing a problem related to his original injury? No, he was simply doing what all good little groundhogs do when winter approaches: he was going into hibernation.

During the following months, he was a model patient. He did not need to be cleaned or fed and was always on hand for an "up close and personal" session with visitors. When removed from his kennel, he bore a remarkable resemblance to a furry bowling ball. He was in a deep sleep and no amount of handling disturbed his slumber. All we could do was wait, watch, and enjoy the totally undemanding creature.

Groundhog's Day came and went, but our little 'hog still did not stir. As March arrived, I became concerned. The animal had not eaten or drunk anything since early December and showed no signs of waking up. By mid-March, he peeped open one eye from time to time, but quickly slipped back into his long nap. On one occasion, thinking he was waking, I placed fresh food into his cage. A short time later, I found him with his nose resting on an ear of corn blissfully in dreamland.

My worry increased and I called on my friends at Noah's Ark in Pasadena, Maryland for advice. I knew they were over-wintering a groundhog and wanted to find out if theirs had emerged from hibernation. They said their permanent adult groundhog had, indeed, awakened but a juvenile that had over-wintered with it was still snoozing. I asked if I should give our 'hog some fluids and their response was, "Couldn't hurt". On March 19, with still no sign of waking, I gave our Sleeping Beauty 20cc of fluids by injection under the skin and we crossed our fingers.

By April 4, our tardy 'hog was finally awake and eating. We'll never know if the fluids helped get things started or if it was simply his time to return to the world of the living. Once fully awake, we noticed that the head tilt had disappeared completely; sleep and time had worked their wonders. His aggressiveness was somewhat subdued but those large front teeth were still a bit frightening. Dave and I were, once again, called on to do the honors of removing the large rodent from his kennel for the daily cleaning. I was delighted to perform this duty.

On a sunny day in late April, we decided it was time for the 'hog to return to his rightful place in the wild. He was placed in a box, carried to the edge of our grassy lawn and released. We expected him to bolt for cover but, instead, he just sat there. We waited and watched but he seemed perfectly happy to sit in the sun, in the open, enjoying the spring day. We decided to go back into the Center and give the animal some time to orient himself. When he was still in the same place several hours later, Dave went to check on him. A slight nudge with the toe of a shoe and the groundhog finally scurried off to cover. We hope this winter finds our little Rip Van Winkle curled snugly into a proper burrow snoozing away until spring, like an alarm clock, tells him it is time to rise and shine once again.

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