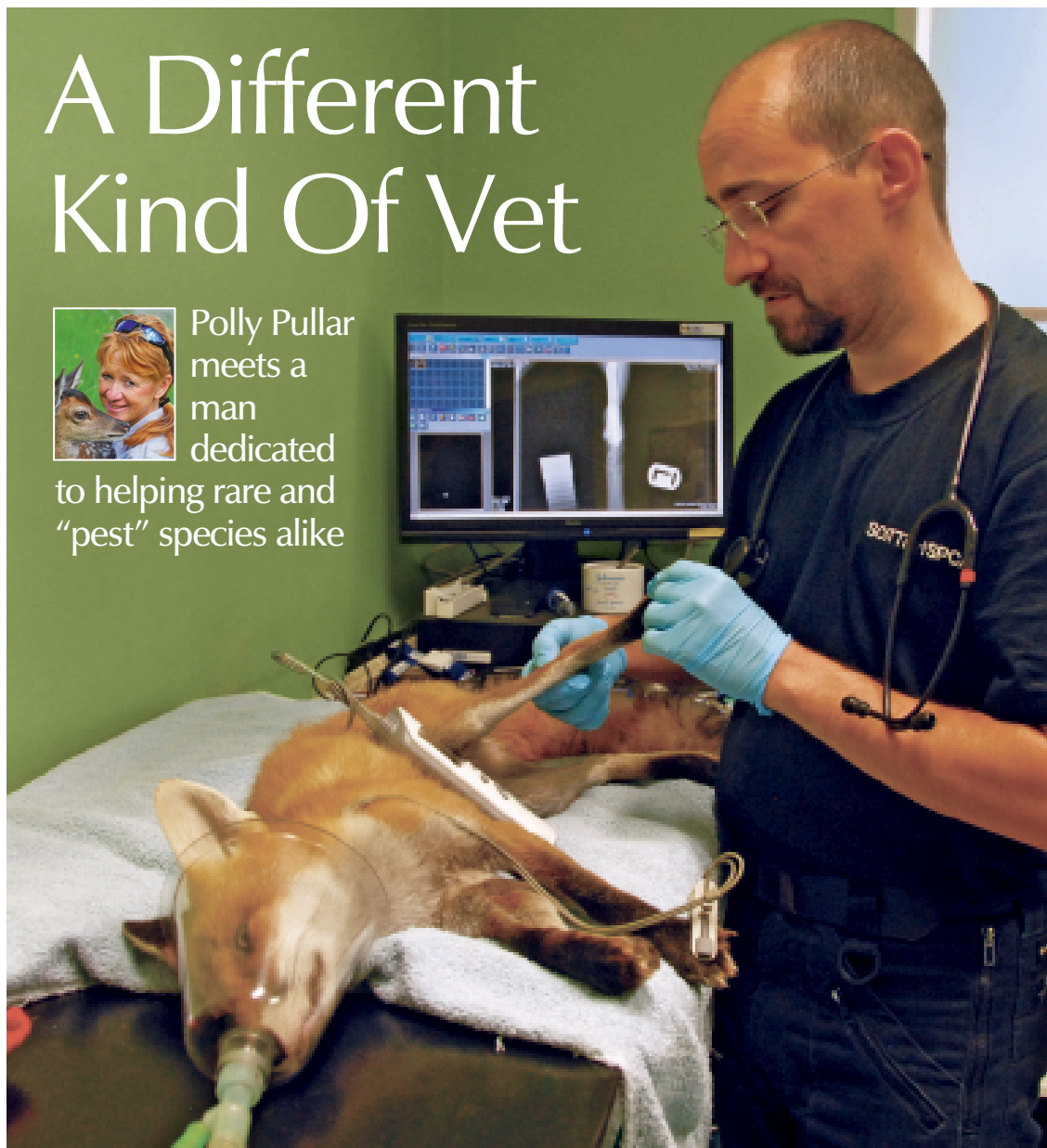


# A Different Kind Of Vet



Polly Pullar meets a man dedicated to helping rare and "pest" species alike



**T**HE modern fox has become a city slicker, and though there are still plenty in the countryside, most of the foxes I see lie dead beside roads.

Foxes are either loved or loathed in equal measure. They have suffered a tireless onslaught of persecution for hundreds of years but now face new hazards in the urban environment.

Despite knowing only too well that they can cause havoc amongst poultry or take weak, injured and dead lambs, I continue to love them

with undiminished passion. I often wonder if they were one of our rarest mammals on a par with the wildcat, would our historic cultural attitudes differ?

Now I stand looking down on a young vixen under anaesthetic on the operating table having her hind leg X-rayed. The vet views the images on the adjacent computer. The injury is healing well; soon she will be fit for release. Her glorious ginger pelt and neat paws, her sharp whiskery little face and black-tipped ears, add up to >>

**Romain examines a vixen's healing leg**

## POLLY'S PEOPLE



From the common...



...to the orphaned...



...and the endangered

making her one of the most beautiful wild mammals of all. It's time for a total change of attitude towards this adaptable survivor.

Every year the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and other wildlife rescue units around the country, receive hundreds of foxes, adding to the burgeoning numbers of wildlife casualties. The problem grows at a frightening rate as more roads, industrial development and intensive agriculture scar the landscape, and habitat loss pressurises creatures into detrimental, often fatal, contact with humans.

In June this year alone, the SSPCA's state-of-the-art wildlife hospital at Fishcross in Clackmannanshire received 2000 new patients. Annual numbers have risen steadily since they opened in 2012 following a £3.5million investment on the 26-hectare (65-acre) site. Last

year they dealt with 9326 casualties.

Already it doesn't seem that the facilities are large enough to cope, and there is growing pressure on the overstretched, dedicated team.

The aim without exception is to return the patients to the wild. At the helm of this extraordinary industrial-scale wildlife rescue facility is Colin Seddon, who works closely with the centre's brilliant specialist vet, Romain Pizzi.

Romain is quietly unassuming, belying the fact that his CV makes for mind-boggling reading. Multi-lingual, he was born and grew up in South Africa, and has worked all over the world. His astonishing range of qualifications means he is highly specialised in myriad veterinary fields, many obscure and notoriously complex.

He is a pioneer with a passion for his work, and on spending time in his company it is apparent that the more difficult the task, the more able he becomes, despite being under constant pressure.

Romain has worked with just about every exotic species imaginable, from rare sea turtles to giraffes and endangered parrots, yet it appears that it is here in Scotland that he has currently found his vocation. Twice a week he visits the SSPCA's centre to check on the endless round of wildlife casualties, while also working with the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland at Edinburgh Zoo.

He is constantly sought to treat exotic creatures elsewhere too, and also to carry out pioneering keyhole procedures on various domestic animals. Alongside this already punishing schedule he travels extensively, lecturing and carrying out fieldwork for wildlife charities that strive to help species such as the endangered orang-utans of Borneo, and the sun bears that have suffered the horrors of bile farming in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

While he explains that every single creature

**Romain and Kaniz check up on a harbour seal pup**





**Romain performing keyhole surgery on a beaver**

he treats has totally different requirements, it is clear that for Romain the most vital aspect is to improve the welfare of all his patients. If that means putting a creature down, then recognising this is also paramount.

“It’s not in anyone’s interests to leave an animal with long-term health issues – not good for the animal, nor the person caring for it. Many animals and birds in zoos and collections may suffer a host of other problems due to the unnatural conditions, stress, or perhaps high numbers housed in close proximity.” He sighs and looks over his glasses at the list of casualties for the day. “I am so behind – we really have a lot to get through, and I haven’t even started on

the birds yet. Look how many there are.”

He smiles again. It is obvious that the work is relentless. The list includes, gulls, pigeons, owls, raptors, a host of passerines and waterfowl including ducks, geese, swans and young gannets. It is indeed going to be a long day.

As the work progresses, Romain’s list continues to mount. The reception area bell rings as more and more casualties trickle in. It is as if he moves two steps forward and then falls back three.

But first there are patients to see that have already been treated; the fox for X-ray, a harbour seal pup that has had neck and movement problems, and a host of other seal pups with various ailments, abscesses, eye infections, flipper wounds or dietary issues. Some of the animals and birds are brought to the operating theatre, including a buzzard with a damaged shoulder that has to be anaesthetised for X-ray.

Next, Romain visits the various sections discussing each patient with the staff member who cares for it, listening as their stories unfold – a hedgehog gave birth soon after an accident and while the stress meant that she killed some of her offspring, three newborns have been rescued. They are being fed two-hourly by clearly concerned April, who will take them home with her to feed them through the night. »

## FASCINATING FACTS

Veterinary science was practised as far back as 9000 BC in the Middle East, in particular Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Turkey.

The TV series *All Creatures Great And Small* was based on the books of Glasgow-trained vet Alf Wight, who used the name James Herriot.

The first veterinary college was set up in Lyons, France, in 1762, by Claude Bourgelat.





**Above: a 12-hour-old baby hedgehog**



**Above right: Romain treats a beaver**

"Do you think they will be all right? I don't think they have had any colostrum," April says.

He reassures her, but everyone knows that the tiny creatures may fade away at any point. Since the 1950s UK hedgehog numbers have crashed from an estimated 30 million to now less than one million. A frightening statistic and even if not totally accurate, it's clear that all is far from well – and every hedgehog counts.

The aroma of hedgehog fills the room as lines and lines of cages house occupants of various sizes. Recently a male hedgehog the size of a beach ball, seemingly the biggest they had ever seen, was brought in much to everyone's shock.

Nicknamed Zeppelin, his miserable story hit the press amid corny headlines – *Vet Deflates Hedgehog*, *Hedgehog Under Pressure*, *Prickly Problem Solved*. Following a collision with a car the poor animal's injuries had caused him to fill with fluid and air, which had to be drawn off.

Romain gently checks his progress. "He still has some fluid collecting but I really don't want to take any more off and think he is doing well.

Eventually it will disperse, poor boy, but let's keep him on the pain relief. Is he eating OK?"


On a previous visit I watched captivated as he removed wire he had inserted into a hedgehog's broken jaw, and the delicate work he performed to rectify a tiny hedgehog's abdominal hernia. His work here is a painstaking process, antibiotic therapy kept to a minimum to ensure resistance does not become a problem, and correct feeding monitored with detailed records for each patient.

It might seem odd that a man who could work anywhere in the world, with some of the rarest creatures on the planet, would choose to spend so much time with Scotland's beleaguered wildlife, which now also includes beavers, sea eagles and red kites.

"I like working here," he says while examining a sparrowhawk's wing. "And it's important. While I may be the one that puts things back together, it's the hard-grafting staff here that do the real work around the clock with little reward for the long hours they put in. Much of this is about nursing care and they do a great job." Then he sighs and adds, "I often wonder if I should go back and train to do medicine as I would have liked to be a paediatrician."

During the course of my travels I come across a great many people but it is here at the SSPCA's Wildlife Hospital that on my numerous visits, I have witnessed people whose work truly does make a difference – people with dedication beyond the call of duty.

"No," I tell Romain, "what you and the team do here is of vital importance."

He smiles and walks wearily down the passage to see more of his fortunate patients. 



**Examining a sparrowhawk**