

Infusion of donations buys bird center another month

BY STEVE GIBBS

Free Press Staff

KEY LARGO — An outpouring of generosity in the form of cash has enabled the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center to continue operating at least for another month.

The Free Press reported on Oct. 21 that the bird rescue and rehabilitation center was just weeks away from closing due to funding shortfalls.

“The fear was real,” said Operations Manager Bruce Horn. “Between two funds we have collected over \$45,000 in two weeks.”

According to Horn, the annual cost of running the center is about \$360,000.

Retired attorney Harvey Ziegler, who donates his time and expertise to the center, started a special fund for donations earmarked for the birds only. He said he sent out about 60 e-mails asking recipients to pass the call for help on to as many people as possible.

“Bob Gintel from the Ocean Reef Club was here yesterday and we talked for about an hour. He has matched a \$10,000 donation from the Ocean Reef Foundation,” Ziegler said. “We



STEVE GIBBS/Free Press

Florida Keys Wild Bird Center founder Laura Quinn with a disabled osprey.

can now operate until at least through November.

“If we can make it to the [tourist] season — whenever that is — we will see an increase in daily donations, but we really need the community to help us find ways to keep the center operating on a sustained basis.”

The center over the years has become a destination for tourists and locals who want to observe and photograph the resident flock. It relies heavily upon donations from visi-

tors and private benefactors to remain in operation.

Ziegler said the center is trying to streamline expenses, but still has a monthly payroll of \$15,000, even though it has laid off four of the staff. The costs of food, medicine, electricity and water are a fixed expense.

“Any regular contributions, no matter how small, will go a long way toward helping us stay afloat,” he said.

Horn points out that, if the center had to count solely on daily donations, it would have closed.

“In August we brought in \$35,000. In September it was \$9,200 and October brought us \$7,000,” he said. “Without the help from generous donors — and especially from the folks at Ocean Reef — we would not be operating now.”

The center pays between \$4,000 and \$5,000 a month for frozen fish to feed the birds. It just received a month’s shipment that has been paid for. Along with food, Horn estimates it costs about \$1,000 a day to run the center.

For more information, call the center at 852-4486.

sgibbs@keysnews.com