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Where the Wild Things Are – An introduction to wildlife rehabilitation

Over the years, as suburbia has encroached more and more on the lands of wild animals, we have seen the devastating effects of the interactions that occur at the wildlife-urban interface. Many wild animals fly into windows, are hit by cars, killed by humans that consider them a nuisance, trapped and relocated in uninhabitable areas, or simply suffer from lack of habitat and food sources. Many wild animals now compete with humans for shelter and food. As we continue to build, the habitats that provide homes and shelters to the region's wildlife continue to shrink (Cerini, 2005). This is when we see raccoons tear apart our garbage cans at night, skunks spray our loose dogs, and Spike comes home with porcupine quills in his muzzle...again.

As these occurrences grew more common, people who cared about animals came together to begin efforts to save some of the wild animals that would otherwise perish due to our invasion of their lifestyles. They called themselves wildlife rehabilitators. And thus, a non-traditional field in animal medicine was born.

Numerous wildlife rehab centers exist around the world today. Many are non-profit organizations that exist solely on donations, grants, and volunteers. With these financial constraints, a rehab center must run a tight protocol on their treatment of these animals.

Some rehab centers are required by law to obtain a license from their state department of fish and wildlife. They must also report any endangered species intakes as well as zoonotic diseases they encounter.

Most of the animals seen at rehab centers include orphans, injured wildlife, and an assortment of otherwise compromised animals. These can include unwanted exotic pets, orphaned animals that are raised by humans until they are too mature/wild to be handled, nests and contents removed from construction sites, and nuisance animals trapped and delivered to the center for relocation. All of these rehab facilities play a vital role. People just need a place to take injured animals. Their sole purpose is to nurture them back to health so they can be released (Wahid, 2004).

One of the first lines of care at a rehab facility includes public education. “We’re a wildlife hospital, an education center and a crisis hotline,” said Eileen Hagerman, executive director of Volunteers for Wildlife. “We handle some 12,000 calls a year, so even though we’re a hospital, that’s certainly not independent of the education side” (Cerini, 2005). Many people will call in for advice before bringing animals in. This is when to assess whether or not the animal is truly compromised. Advice is given as to safe restraint and transport of the animal to the facility. Sometimes problems can be resolved without bothering the animal. Also, if a mom leaves her young for hours at a time, this could simply be a part of the natural history of the animal. “In the spring we get a lot of calls from people who see fledgling birds and feel the need to help them. We

try to educate people to leave the animal where it is; its parent is nearby to help. So during the spring much of what we do is education” (Cerini, 2005).

When an animal is brought into the facility, it is triaged based on how busy the center is, the financial and space constraints, and the degree of the animal’s injury. Some parameters that wildlife rehab centers could use include things such as native vs. non-native animals. When it is the busy baby season, perhaps the center will not treat non-native, invasive species in order to help the native populations thrive. Another consideration is the safety of the staff and animal being treated. Can the animal be safely rehabilitated? An adult, wild, angry, aggressive raccoon whose prognosis is poor may be euthanized to save everyone involved a lot of money, time, danger, and stress. There are other reasons to triage as well. Some rehab centers will only treat animals that can be released back into the wild. They do not condone keeping animals as educational specimens. For example, one-eyed owls can survive in the wild because they hunt more with their ears than eyes. However, one-eyed hawks hunt with their eyes and need both to survive. Although it may be otherwise perfectly healthy, a one-eyed hawk could be euthanized based on this triage policy.

Once an animal is accepted for treatment, the official intake exam begins. The rehabilitator performs a thorough physical exam. The animal is treated for shock. Fluid therapy is started and a rough treatment plan is put into action. Often, blood and fecal analyses are performed. Radiographs are taken as needed for such things as broken bones, gunshot wounds, or fishhooks (Wahid, 2004). The animal is set up with a case

number. It is also usually identified somehow either with an ear tag, tattoo, leg band, or simply a permanent marker.

The medical plan can include fluid therapy schedules, antibiotics, deworming schedules, vaccination schedules, probiotics, and even controlled substance use such as tranquilizers for stress/pain relief. The medical plan can also involve minor surgeries such as wound and fracture repair. The plan also includes a schedule for rechecks and bandage changes.

Most animals that are admitted to a rehab facility are in a state of shock and many of those are emaciated. All animals are gradually weaned from fluid diets onto solid foods as they recover. High calorie diets are fed to emaciated animals to facilitate weight gain. A wildlife rehabilitator must have a strong knowledge of each animal's nutritional needs and how to fulfill those needs by feeding food types that the animal would naturally eat. Omnivores are pretty easy to please as far as diet goes. There are plenty of picky eaters out there though. Some shorebirds will only eat live fish. Some insectivore birds will only eat live insects. A Nighthawk will only eat insects while they are in flight. Baby birds of prey are not capable of digesting bones, fur, or feathers. Their food must be dissected before they are fed. It is a labor of love.

Once the treatment plan is in place, the animal needs a place to call home during its stay. Proper husbandry is vital to the survival of wild animals. Baby mammals are caged in aquariums or incubators as needed. Heating pads are an essential accessory in the baby mammal ward and for extremely ill animals. Bank cages are used to house larger

mammals and ill birds. Once the animals are more stable, they are moved outside to acclimate to the region's climate. They are often given a heat lamp overnight initially. The enclosures have floors ranging from soil to gravel to concrete. There are large flight cages for the birds to get exercise in. There are paddocks and pastures for the ungulates to roam in.

One of the most important details when it comes to caging wildlife is making sure the enclosure is escape-proof. This can become very tedious when it comes to small squirrelly critters like weasels. It is especially important if you house predator animals anywhere near a prey species. It is also important to consider the stress level of the animals. Are they sensitive to noises? Are they sensitive to population size within the caging? It has been noticed that the Virginia Opossum will cannibalize other opossums in an enclosure if they are too densely housed.

Working with wildlife comes with many hazards. As with most animals, there are bite wounds and scratches to consider. But wildlife also bring an assortment of other cards to the table. Quills, venomous fangs, talons, beaks, hooves, and odoriferous sprays are to mention just a few. All wildlife require special tools and methods of restraint. These can include leather gloves, nets, catch poles, falcon hoods, sheets, towels, or even stanchions.

Even taking all precautions not to get injured by wildlife, the animals still pose a very serious threat. Animals and humans share approximately 175 known communicable diseases. Many diseases that are readily controllable with preventative health programs

in domestic species go largely unchecked in wild free-ranging populations (Hadidian et al, 1997). There are a handful of common zoonoses that wildlife rehabilitators tend to encounter. *Chlamydiosis* is transmitted by birds as common as ducks and pigeons. Raccoons can host *Baylisascaris*, which causes cutaneous, visceral and ocular larval migrans. *Echinococcosis/Hydatidosis* is found in the fox and coyote. Many mammals can carry *Giardiasis*. *Leptospirosis* can be found in raccoons, opossums, white-tailed deer, and striped skunks; all common visitors to rehab facilities. There is also, of course, *Rabies* to consider. *Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever* is seen in rabbits and Virginia Opossums. *Salmonellosis* is seen in reptiles, birds, and mammals. And finally, the rabbit along with many rodents can carry *Tularemia* (Hadidian et al, 1997). Also, any animal can be home to an infestation of mites, lice, ticks, or any other ectoparasite. With all of these risks, it is constantly at the forefront of the rehabilitator's thoughts when dealing with these animals. Proactive safety measures can easily safeguard any staff member from these hazards. These include proper cage washing, proper personal hygiene between cages, the use of diluted bleach footbaths, and latex gloves when working with any wild animal. This is where well planned worming and vaccination schedules help to protect the staff as well.

Once the animals are able to take care of themselves they are ready for release. There are many protocols in place for their release. It must be certain that the animal has not become imprinted. The animal must not be tame. If a raccoon is no longer afraid of humans, this could lead to its demise at the end of a young kid's toy rifle barrel. Birds are flight-tested. Prey animals such as owls and weasels are live prey tested to make sure

they can successfully hunt for their food. Many healthy orphans are released based on weight or age guidelines. Once they are big enough to survive on their own, they are set free. But where do they go?

Often times a Naturalist will work with the rehab center to come up with suitable sites for release of the animals. It is important to release the animal in an area that provides it with natural resources. This requires knowledge of the individual animal's natural history. Many are released near the sites they were found. There are also many people who own private land that allow for release on their property. This is another valuable resource for rehab centers.

Volunteering for a wildlife rehabilitation center can come in many forms. You can assist with the animal's medical care. By the time birds fly off and raccoons are released into the wild, they've been treated, fed and nursed back to health by dozens of volunteers (Wahid, 2004). You can transport the animal to and from the center. You can donate land. You can donate time answering phones. You can, of course, donate money. The best is to create a public awareness that these centers do exist and that they are there to help an animal in need. "About 70 percent to 80 percent of the animals that are brought in are saved," said wildlife technician Susanna Kraig. "If it weren't for the center, it would be a slow death for a lot of these animals" (Wahid, 2004).

Bibliography

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