

Caring for Wildlife in Your Shelter

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After spending some time doing hands-on animal-care work at a shelter, most people consider themselves experts of sorts when it comes to caring for cats and dogs. It may take a while to get the hang of removing a fractious cat from the top cage without worrying too much about getting clawed in the face, but you eventually get there.

For many staff, the learning curve for caring for wild animals is quite a bit steeper. After all, unless your shelter has its own wildlife-care center, you probably don't take in very many wild animals -- assuming your shelter even accepts them. And whenever you do receive the bird with a broken wing or that baby opossum initially mistaken for a hairy rat, his stay with you is brief: The animal should be picked up by a rehabber or some other wildlife agency by day's end, or, if necessary, euthanized as soon as possible.

For most of the wild animals who enter your facility, however, those few hours they spend in your care are crucial to their well-being and ultimate survival. Yours is the job of assessing the animals, stabilizing them, reducing their stress, and treating them with warmth and rehydration until they can be transported to a wildlife-care center. That's why, if you're a shelter worker responsible for handling or otherwise caring for the wild animals you take in, it's vital to understand the basics of wildlife care.

No Cold Noses or Warm Hugs

Caring for wild animals can be summarized this way: Wild animals are not dogs and cats. Most dogs and cats like human attention; wild animals generally fear people and need to be left alone. Most dogs and cats should be housed in a way that allows for frequent interaction with staff, volunteers, and potential adopters; wild animals should be housed so that they have total privacy from other creatures and little stimulation from their temporary caretakers. Most dogs and cats should be handled frequently and with affection; wildlife should be handled only when absolutely necessary.

Notice a pattern? Caring for wildlife involves a mind-set that many who work in shelters may be loath to adopt: The less you interact with a wild animal in your care, the better off that animal will be. Calling in a gaggle of young volunteers to take a curious peek at the injured hawk who was just brought in is one of the worst things you can do for that animal.

"People who work in shelters are generally very nurturing and want to comfort dogs and cats when they come in," says Amanda Graham, associate director of the Animal Protection Society (APS) of Orange County, North Carolina. "But probably the last thing wild animals want is to have human contact. From an emotional standpoint, it's a real adjustment for staff to make."

Minimizing the level of interaction you have with wild animals -- particularly orphans -- will also minimize the likelihood of imprinting. Imprinting occurs when a young animal identifies with a human caretaker instead of an adult of her own species. As a result, she has trouble developing behaviors such as finding food, protecting herself from predators, or learning to fear humans -- making her a poor candidate for release back into the wild. Imprinting is rarely an issue in the shelter that holds wild animals for short periods of time, but shelter staff should nonetheless be cognizant of this potentially harmful effect of interacting too much with wild animals.

Finally, handling animals as little as possible -- and carefully when you do have to handle them -- is also better for you. After all, baby skunks can spray you, porcupines can stick you, squirrels can bite you, and certain wild mammals may potentially expose you to rabies. Stay safe around wildlife by learning how to properly handle various species and taking appropriate precautions (such as wearing gloves) when you must handle them.

Yoga and Meditation, Wildlife Style

No matter what the species, wild animals who enter your facility share a common affliction: stress. According to wildlife-rehabilitation experts, stress is the leading cause of death in animals admitted to rehab facilities.

Wild animals usually don't show stress in the ways we're used to. Some may run around in circles or vocalize, but others may appear still and quiet. Injured adult animals will often be more stressed than orphaned baby animals, but all will have weakened immune systems just when they need them to be strongest.

"Try to imagine what the experience of coming into your shelter is like from a wild animal's point of view," says Sally Fekety, director of Animal Sheltering Issues for The HSUS. "The animal has been to hell and back before even coming into your facility, or he wouldn't be there in the first place. Reducing his stress is the first step on the road to 'Wellville.' "

Shirley Spas, wildlife coordinator for the Humane Society of North Pinellas in Clearwater, Florida, says that her organization's wild animal triage protocol was developed primarily with the goal of reducing the animals' stress. "We adhere to the basic principles of keeping birds and mammals warm, dark, and quiet," she says. According to Spas, ever since the shelter began paying homage to those three words a couple years ago, they have not lost a single baby bird to stress.

That's why it's vital for your shelter to set up its entire wildlife-care system with an eye toward stress reduction. For example, keep all occupied wildlife holding cages and carriers covered at all times, being sure to allow for adequate light and ventilation.

Cover the cage or carrier even when you've just completed an evaluation and the animal is waiting for you to finish writing down your last notes. Position your wildlife assessment and housing areas as far as possible from barking dogs, meowing cats,

chatting staffers, and other sources of noise. Be sure to get the animal settled comfortably before spending any time completing intake paperwork. Move animals as gently as possible, and speak as little as possible and in quiet tones when near them.

In addition, avoid assessing animals in the presence of the individuals who rescued them and brought them to you. Not only does the rescuer's presence increase the animals' stress, but you may have to communicate a bad prognosis to the individual. Instead, explain that you'll do all you can for the animal and thank the person, then move the animal to a quiet area for assessment.

After ruling out the presence of severe injuries and other conditions that warrant immediate euthanasia, some shelters give birds and other animals who appear particularly stressed a "calming down" period of 30 to 120 minutes before performing a more thorough evaluation. "Most animals can be examined right away," says Mary Buckwalter, exhibits director for the Kalamazoo Nature Center in Michigan, which runs rehabilitation and education programs. "But if he's really stressed out [when he first arrives], we'll put him in a box and let him get warm."

Figuring Out What's Wrong

Staff trained in wildlife assessment should rely on a protocol to help identify which animals need no veterinary attention, which animals do require treatment, and which animals require immediate euthanasia to end their suffering. "Staff should strive to make sure that assessment and treatment decisions are made in the best interests of the animal," says Fekety. "Unfortunately, what's best for an animal isn't always what makes the staffer feel good."

Many wild animals brought to the typical shelter are healthy enough to be released back into their natural habitats after a period of weaning or rehabilitation. What they need from you is evaluation, stabilization, and the beginnings of treatment. In addition to its assessment protocol, your shelter should have a triage protocol in place to cover treatments, fluids, and feeding. Care and treatment guidelines should be detailed enough to help staff respond to a wide variety of species and conditions.

"It's important that staff know as much about the natural history of the animal as possible," says Buckwalter. She cites adult wild rabbits' feeding schedules as an example: A caretaker who does not know that rabbits feed just twice a day in the wild may endanger the rabbit if she feeds him more frequently in the shelter. Your shelter's protocol should alert staff to species-specific issues such as this one. And it should cover the basics as well -- such as refraining from giving food to chilled animals until after their body temperatures have returned to normal.

Making a Home Away from Home

Your shelter's written guidelines should also cover temporary housing. After all, baby birds need simulated nests, baby opossums should be given simulated pouches, and

virtually all other kinds of wild animals will have similar needs specific to their natural histories.

Many shelters assess animals and house them in the same room. Before APS opened its off-site wildlife rehabilitation center, staff evaluated and housed wild animals in the room adjoining the shelter's night drop-off cages. Because dogs would often be placed in the cages at night, this wasn't the ideal arrangement, but it was the only room available. Many shelters modify a storage closet or other small room for the purpose of wildlife care and housing.

Whichever room you use to assess and house wild animals, it should be as far away from dog and cat treatment rooms as possible, and not only for purposes of keeping wild animals' stress levels down: Veterinary experts speculate that wild animals who come into contact with droplets or airborne particles of modified-live vaccine used for domestic animals (distemper, for example) could potentially contract the disease.

Make sure the wildlife area is kept quiet and darkened so that wild animals can feel as safe as possible when being evaluated, monitored, and housed temporarily. Post a sign on any doors to the room that reads, "Wildlife Holding Area -- Employees Only -- Please Be Quiet." Outfit the room with counter and/or table space and plenty of shelves or cabinets to hold the various basic supplies needed for wildlife care. Essential supplies range from gloves of various thicknesses to wire cages.

Be sure to have various enclosures set up and ready to house incoming critters. "Few things can be worse for a wild animal than taking him in and holding him in your hand for ten minutes while you're scrambling to get his housing ready," says Fekety.

Properly vented boxes, crates, stainless steel cages, and aquariums with fastened tops all make appropriate housing, depending on the age, size, and species of animal. "Boxes work wonderfully when you're caring for orphans for a day or two," Buckwalter says. For baby birds, Fekety recommends a plastic or ceramic bowl outfitted with a cushioned "nest" of perfume-free facial tissues. Or you can improvise further: Buckwalter often lines two laundry baskets with netting or thin wire mesh, then ties them together, opening to opening, with twist ties. The result is a "soft cage" in which songbirds and mammals such as rabbits can be housed and easily transported when necessary.

One of the most essential ingredients in successful wild-animal housing is a source of heat. As Spas says, next to silence and darkness, warmth is the most important need of wild animals suffering from the stress of temporary captivity.

The heating pad is a staple of the wildlife rehabber, although many shelters also use infrared heat lamps and incubators from time to time. The heating source should never be placed inside the box or cage. Instead, position the heat source outside and at one end of the enclosure so that the animal can move away from the heat after she is warm enough. Heating pads, set on low, should rest under half of the box or crate, on the side where the

animal's nest or "den" is located. Many shelters place thermometers on or near the box or cage to monitor the temperature.

A Return to the Wild

Caring for wildlife even temporarily requires an investment in resources and, above all, know-how. That's why, for many shelter workers, it can be frustrating to invest so much energy in stabilizing a wild animal only to say goodbye to the animal within the day.

But moving wild animals out of your shelter quickly is essential to their long-term prospects. Unlike the typical animal shelter, wildlife rehabbers and other wildlife-care agencies generally have the expertise and equipment needed for successful long-term care and rehabilitation. That's why your shelter should only serve as a way station for injured or orphaned wildlife. Staff should start making those calls to your shelter's network of wildlife experts as soon as possible after the animal is accepted.

The goal of the Humane Society of North Pinellas is to transport all wild animals to rehab facilities by the end of each day. That should be your shelter's goal, too. After all, the quicker you get them to a responsible rehabilitator, the better their chances of being returned to a life in the wild.

Euthanasia of Wildlife: Finding the Means to an End

A shelter veterinary technician holds an injured baby squirrel in her hands, waiting for her colleagues to deliver a lethal dose of sodium pentobarbital. But the attending veterinarian and another vet tech begin to argue over which method of injection to use -- intraperitoneal or intravenous. Before they agree on the injection route, the squirrel dies in her hands.

When it comes to euthanizing wild animals, debates like this one occur far too frequently. Dozens of people in any given community might be performing what they call "wildlife euthanasia," but because of their varying motivations, skill levels, access to controlled substances, and commitment to humane care, they may disagree about the best way to meet any given wild animal's needs. Even those who share a deep concern for an animal's well-being and have access to sodium pentobarbital struggle with their inability to provide a stress-free death. For instance, while a warm hug would help lower a dog's stress level during euthanasia, it could only increase the suffering for a wild animal.

Disagreements aren't limited to debates about euthanasia methods. In many cases, people disagree about whether a given wild animal should be euthanized to begin with. For example, a nuisance wildlife control operator may put an animal to death simply for a homeowner's "convenience." A state official might recommend euthanasia of a healthy animal in response to the threat of rabies. And a wildlife rehabilitator may euthanize an animal only when the animal cannot be returned to the wild.

If your animal care and control agency accepts wild animals, be sure to work with a veterinarian to develop wildlife-euthanasia protocols. In addition, your shelter might also consider performing euthanasia services for local wildlife rehabbers and nuisance wildlife control operators, who often lack specialized training and access to controlled euthanasia drugs. After all, your agency has an ethical obligation to deal with those in your community who -- whether out of ignorance or indifference -- may be putting animals to death inhumanely. Sometimes, offering to handle euthanasia yourself is the only way to guarantee that wild animals receive the best possible care during their final hours.

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