

The Wildlife Rehabilitation Community and the Web

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Opening the file on wildlife rehabilitation

Wildlife rehabilitation is a complex, dynamic, and interdisciplinary profession that requires commitment and dedication to the care of sick and injured wildlife. But in order to provide the best of care to these animals, wildlife rehabilitators must continually improve and hone their knowledge and skills. Long gone are the days when the wildlife rehabilitator was an isolated, self-taught individual with good intentions but little formal training. Today, most state wildlife agencies require some type of certified apprenticeship and education to be eligible to become a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Those wildlife rehabilitators working with migratory bird species must, in addition to state requirements, meet U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) requirements for federal rehabilitation permits. Both state and federal wildlife agencies require annual written reports documenting wild animals handled by the rehabilitator and annual permit renewals. In some states, continuing education is mandatory for permit renewal.

Wildlife rehabilitators not only serve the wild animals in their care, they serve the public through public education. Rehabilitators receive countless telephone calls from the public with questions about wildlife diseases, orphaned or injured wild animals, regulatory issues, and urban wildlife problems. Rehabilitators have become liaisons for the local, state, and federal wildlife agencies, working cooperatively to inform and educate the public on many wildlife issues. Often the wildlife rehabilitators are the front-line for reporting on emerging wildlife diseases, and for representing their communities on political, economic, and humane issues affecting wildlife habitat and protection (see *WT*, Vol. 2, No. 1).

How then, can wildlife rehabilitators maintain their professionalism, continue to further their knowledge and abilities, and sustain networking connections to other professionals when most rehabilitators comprise a demographic of a home-based, non-profit, volunteer work force? One answer: the WEB.

Welcome to the Information Age!

Similar to the 1960's and >70's when nearly every household had at least one television, today's homes commonly contain at least one computer linked to the internet. The world wide web has become a valuable information resource on many levels. For wildlife rehabilitators, the internet provides access to information on wildlife species pertaining to their natural history, nutrition, diseases, zoonoses, veterinary medicine, housing, and captive management. Internet directories

exist to help link wildlife agencies, environmental organizations, and animal protection organizations to research information on wildlife regulations, wildlife conservation, endangered species information, animal welfare, and even fund-raising. Training, education, and job opportunities are also posted on many websites. The ability to communicate with other wildlife rehabilitators and colleagues, regardless of geography, time, and language barriers, has expanded the rehabilitation community to one of global proportions and influence.

In unity there is strength. The role and reputation of wildlife rehabilitators has dramatically changed, in part, due to the facilitated access to a plethora of practical information and resources through the internet. Unfortunately, historical representations and perceptions of wildlife rehabilitators were those of eccentric, histrionic, confrontational Abunny-huggers.@ Wildlife agencies avoided interactions with them whenever possible. Interactions were sometimes antagonistic because they were not speaking the same language. There were communication barriers. Wildlife agencies cited wildlife population management and regulations, while rehabbers voiced concerns for health, welfare, and safety of individual wild animals.

Prior to the routine use of the internet as a resource, state and national wildlife rehabilitation associations began forming as a means to disseminate salient and timely information to the rehabilitation community and to promote standardized training for rehabilitators. The integration of the internet as a resource for the rehabilitation community resulted in the expedient dissemination of news, inquiries, and information. Moreover, it has facilitated amicable dialogue between disparate groups. The internet has broken down communication barriers and accelerated learning curves. Wildlife rehabilitators are now well-versed in state and federal wildlife policies and regulations, while wildlife agencies recognize the vital role that wildlife rehabilitators play in public education and in providing skilled care to injured wildlife. Wildlife rehabilitators are becoming part of the regulatory process, as state agencies have begun to invite them to participate in stakeholder committees on wildlife issues.

Would this evolution have occurred in the absence of internet technology? Undoubtedly, but ushered by internet technology, the rate of change in the past few years has been exponential.

One caveat to this remarkable achievement is the concern for anecdotal or unsubstantiated information available on the internet. One must ascertain the validity of the information received. In particular, Achat-rooms@ and unmoderated discussion lists are often replete with opinion and conjecture, with little authenticated expertise. Referencing institutional and organizational web sites would be better advised for legitimate, credible information.

Becoming User-Friendly

There are three main categories of internet services for information resources on the world wide web: discussion lists, websites, and on-line data bases.

Personal e-mail and discussion lists provide direct communication with specific individuals or group lists through electronically delivered messages and responses sent in real time. Discussion lists usually require a subscription to participate. The discussion list is generally dedicated to a particular subject or focus, such as wildlife rehabilitation, and submissions or inquiries to the list

(often referred to as Aquestions to the universe@) are automatically distributed to the subscribers who may or may not respond. Discussion lists are unmoderated and contain both opinion and factual information. The participant is advised to scrutinize the information received. One such discussion list, WLRHAB, resides on a website at North Dakota State University. Information ranging from diet and husbandry to medical management and release criteria of various wildlife species may be solicited by wildlife rehabilitators at all levels from other subscribers to the list. (See sidebar for addresses of all sites mentioned in this article.)

Web sites are a second, commonly used resource for information on wildlife rehabilitation and wildlife-related topics. These webs are aptly termed because they serve as a primary resource and provide links to other internet sites and servers, thereby creating a meshwork or web of interconnections. Many web sites provide hyperlinks to programs such as Real Player, which allows active viewing of video recordings.

The internet is replete with web sites for institutions and organizations involved in wildlife rehabilitation, wildlife conservation, wildlife medicine and disease, and wildlife protection. The Wildlife Rehabilitation and Information Directory is an important first web site to visit for novice wildlife web-surfers. It was created by Rhoda DeVold at North Dakota State University, who also manages the WLREHAB listserv for wildlife rehabilitators. The Directory contains an extensive catalog of information on basic rehabilitation techniques, a directory to locate wildlife rehabilitators, links to wildlife agencies and wildlife rehabilitation organizations, and an on-line connection to ordering books and supplies. The National Wildlife Rehabilitation Association (Nwra), International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), American Association of Zoo Veterinarians (AAZV), American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians (AAWV), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), International Wildlife Education and Conservation (IWEC), and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) each have comprehensive web sites pertaining to wildlife.

Individual wildlife centers commonly create a home page to promote their mission. The Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota, Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, Inc. in Delaware, and P.A.W.S. Wildlife Center in Washington state are fine examples of regional wildlife facilities that provide educational information and links to other resource sites.

Some web sites have chat rooms, which allow real-time communication electronically. All members of the chat room may view the ongoing dialogue, similar to a party-line on the telephone, and similarly lacking privacy or confidentiality. In this regard, the use of chat rooms may be limited to quick and easy retrieval of anecdotal information, or to gather opinions on specific and time-sensitive issues.

Retrieval of the latest scientific information and bibliographic references on wildlife subjects is possible through search engines such as Yahoo, Dogpile, and Alta Vista. ISI/NOAH (Institute for Scientific Information/ AVMA Network of Animal Health), and VIN (Veterinary Information

Network) are excellent sites for abstracts and references on scientific articles from veterinary and biomedical journals, but require prior subscription for access.

On-line data bases are a third, often overlooked internet resource category. Participants submit data to a selected database as part of a cooperative effort to compile germane biological and biomedical data on a range of animal species. Several institutions have been compiling such databases for general reference, including The Smithsonian Institution, The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP), and ISIS/ARKS. This information is usually highly technical in content and of most use to those involved in specific scientific investigations.

When using the internet to search for information, it is helpful to begin with websites that provide broad and integrated subjects that link to more specific topics. The Wildlife Rehabilitation and Information Directory is an excellent example of a first step approach to research one's informational needs. Wildlife rehabilitators often subscribe to discussion lists, such as WLREHAB, as a means to generate queries and to solicit practical advice. Listservers such as WILDLIFE HEALTH and ProMED provide up-to-date news on global events pertaining to wildlife and public health concerns. Specific websites of governmental agencies, environmental organizations, and professional veterinary associations offer information specific to their areas of expertise. Each of these internet resources fills a niche in the information ecosystem. It is worthwhile to surf each of these categories of internet services in advance of a specific need in order to become familiar with their systems and adept at their applications.

The internet and the web are tools that enable all of us to do our jobs better and more efficiently. Beyond the convenient access to information, the web facilitates communication, bringing all communities closer together, circulating ideas and experiences, and helping us to understand that political, economic, and regulatory borders do not exist for wildlife. There is a unified world and an interdependent environment. And perhaps that is the best lesson we can learn from the web.

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WILDLIFE REHABILITATION ON THE WEB

Discussion Lists:

WLREHAB <www.cc.ndsu.nodak.edu/instruct/devold/twrid.html>
WILDLIFE HEALTH <wildlifehealth@relay.doit.wisc.edu>
ProMED <promed@promed.isid.harvard.edu>

Web sites:

Wildlife Rehabilitation and Information Directory <wildliferehab.virtualave.net>
NWRA National Wildlife Rehabilitation Assoc. <www.nwrawildlife.org>
IWRC International Wildlife Rehab. Council <www.iwrc-online.org>
USFWS U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service <www.fws.gov>
EPA Environmental Protection Agency <www.epa.gov>
CDC Centers for Disease Control <www.cdc.gov>
AVMA American Veterinary Medical Assoc. <www.avma.org>
AAV Assoc. Of Avian Veterinarians <www.aav.org>
AAZV American Assoc. Of Zoo. Veterinarians <www.worldzoo.org/aazv/aazv.html>
IAAAM International Assoc. Of Aquatic Animal Med. <www.iaaam.org>
NCH National Center of Homeopathy <www.homeopathic.org>
IWEC International Wildlife Education & Conservation <www.iwec.org>
ABA American Birding Association <www.americanbirding.org>
ABC American Bird Conservancy <www.abcbirds.org>

Home Pages

PAWS Wildlife Center <www.paws.org/wildlife.html>
Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, Inc. <www.tristatebird.org>
The Raptor Center, Univ. Of Minnesota <www.raptor.cvm.umn.edu>