

## Ways to Help More Wildlife AND Reduce Your Caseload

By Shirley Casey

With 'busy season' coming up fast, wildlife rehabilitators are preparing to help wildlife in need. In addition to preparing rehab facilities, supplies and human resources, many are reviewing ways to prevent wildlife from being harmed and not needing to be brought into rehab. It is important to remember (and to remind others) that wildlife rehab is far more than direct, 'hands on' care; preventing and reducing problems are equally important. Rehabilitators have found many ways to help wildlife remain in their natural environment, and out of rehab – therefore REDUCING their workload. Here are some ideas that have proven to be workable and effective:

**(1.) Connect with groups or businesses who may be a logical 'first contact point' for the public seeking wildlife help.** This could include veterinary clinic staff members, animal control agencies, animal welfare groups, hardware and feed stores, pet supply stores, fire departments and other law enforcement agencies. In some cases, it may simply remind them about previously discussed topics and available resources, and provide a current list of local rehabilitators. In other cases, it may involve orienting new groups or staff members who are less familiar with the issues and approaches and may need more info. By enlisting the support of staff who connect with the public, as well as management of the organizations will help spread the word about what can prevent wildlife from being harmed, like keeping cats indoors and not feeding wildlife. Initiating one-on-one communications can help build a personal connection far more effectively than broad-based social media broadcast emails. Invest the time to foster the relationships with those important resources.

**(2.) Educate the public on the importance of PREVENTION to reduce incidents of wildlife becoming orphaned, kidnapped, injured, etc.** Develop and provide informational sheets on ways to prevent and minimize wildlife problems and distribute to those 'first contact points' listed above. Offer seasonal articles and tips on what's happening with wildlife (e.g., baby season, migration) and ideas on ways to reduce problems. Utilize social media as an effective platform for posting informative topics (e.g., keeping cats indoors, not using glue traps) and photos (fawns or fledglings that are not in need of help). Encourage the public and businesses to protect wildlife from harm and recognize/appreciate when they do (e.g., keep pets under control, identify non-lethal pest control methods). Educate people to better appreciate and respect wildlife through programs at schools, community groups, and other events or gatherings. Target topics relevant to the local community, location, season, species, current issues/concerns, culture, and values when framing the message. Encourage the public to become invested in

spreading the message of wildlife awareness and stewardship.

**(3.) Reduce numbers of animals inadvertently orphaned by professional services.** This can include landscapers, tree trimmers, roofers, construction crews, utility crews. Ask if they have a protocol on what to look for and what to do in order to avoid problems with wildlife. Explain to the staff doing the work and their supervisor/management team that many customers want and expect them to avoid harming wildlife on their property. Explain how the contractor's work and activity may create orphans or injure animals. Explain ways to minimize the problems, including providing printed and illustrated resources on ways to avoid creating orphans or injuries and how to encourage the wild mothers to retrieve healthy offspring. Provide phone numbers that they can text or call for quick advice to help avoid or resolve human-wildlife conflicts – or if an animal is injured or orphaned. Consider providing the information and websites in English and other languages that may be used in the local community and among staff members.

**(4.) Keep upgrading hotline services and advice given.** Make sure that all rehabilitators and volunteers answering the phone, text or emails have adequate knowledge about natural history, common problems and solutions, risks, and regulations. It is also important that they understand that not all young wildlife needs to be rescued and they know how to assess the situation to prevent unnecessary kidnapping. Many times, a finder can be given info to resolve current concerns and prevent future problems that could require wild animals to be brought to rehabilitation (e.g., keeping pets away from the rabbit nest, not feeding raccoons). Time is often of the essence during these situations, so it is important to respond to callers ASAP and appropriately motivate them to take humane and positive action. While some calls can be challenging and time-consuming, consider such phone calls as educational opportunities - a way to help the animal AND reduce rehab workload. Providing timely help also reduces the likelihood of the untrained rescuer trying to care for the animal themselves, and thereby risking the animal's well-being as well as exposing themselves to possible injury or zoonotic diseases.

**(5.) Reunite wild babies with their parents as often as possible.** Reuniting or renesting young wildlife with the parent(s) is ideal, as it keeps the young in the wild and out of rehabilitation. However, the process of reuniting or renesting may take detailed instructions over multiple calls to get it done safely and correctly. Therefore, there are several steps that are important to follow: (a) Expand your knowledge of species and common problems, (b) Develop a plan for assessing and reuniting the youngsters, (c) Prepare for quick action when the rescuer calls, (d) Know which species will retrieve their young and if retrieval will be safe for all involved, (e) Develop (or find) policy and action plans related to when renesting or reunions are possible or

appropriate, (f) Learn the risks and how to minimize them for the humans and the wild animals, (g) Ensure that those answering calls from the public understand the objectives, plans, species, timing, and risks of reuniting the juveniles. In the end, the mother animal does a much better job of child-rearing than even the best rehabilitator.

**(6.) Reduce the number of animals orphaned due to nuisance control practices.** Informing people of humane, non-lethal methods to resolve human-wildlife conflicts is one of the best ways to start. Regardless, some people will still contact nuisance control companies to ‘take care of the problem.’ Try to educate and motivate the nuisance control and pest control operators and companies to try non-lethal, humane methods, especially during baby season. Consider action to change state and local regulations for nuisance control practices. The subject of nuisance control company practices is particularly difficult and often highly political. Identify, collaborate with and refer to licensed nuisance control operators who are certified in and dedicated to humane practices.

**(7.) Reduce trapping and relocation.** Trapping and relocating wildlife are rarely effective long-term solutions to human-wildlife conflicts. Therefore, suggest other non-lethal, humane solutions and exclusion techniques to avoid or resolve problems. Explain that trapping and relocating wildlife may result in the animal’s death due to improper relocation, or it could result in the spread of disease (info may need to be offered in multiple languages). Trapping and relocating a nursing mother can result in orphaned babies that are unlikely to survive on their own. Also, trapping and relocation programs may violate state and/or local regulations in many areas due to disease risks, such as rabies or distemper. Help to minimize or eliminate trap loan programs offered by government agencies or utility companies by providing education and better alternatives.

**(8.) Identify risks to wildlife and work to reduce them.** Consider actions to reduce small hazardous items, such as fishing hooks and lines, garden or sport nets, yogurt containers, plastic soda can holders, other litter, and holiday lighting or nets that could entangle antlered animals. Think about factors that can result in wildlife needing rehabilitation and what can be done about those. This could include: wildlife policies and regulations (e.g., pesticide use, poisoning, rodenticides, trapping of “non-target” species), habitat loss, lack of safe wildlife coordinators, pollution, injuries by pets, lighted structures that attract migrating birds at night (e.g., Fatal Light Awareness Program), climate change, and more. Collaborate with partners working on those types of issues, such as environmental and conservation groups, animal welfare groups, wildlife habitat groups, government agencies, and many more.

**(9.) Check with other rehabilitators and facilities on their rehab capacities for animals, hotlines, etc.** Make arrangements to refer wildlife calls or cases to other licensed

rehabilitators with the capacity for those species, veterinary clinics for health care, or other agencies. It helps to do this before the busy season and periodically during the season.

**(10.) Lastly, do some simple recordkeeping and celebrate the successes!!** Some rehabilitators list methods they have used to prevent or minimize harm to wildlife as a way to record those accomplishments. Document numbers, types of wildlife calls, how the issue was resolved, and whether or not the animal was admitted (or re-nested or reunited). Do a quick calculation for the return on investment of the time (and cost) dealing with and resolving the issue, versus if the animal(s) had been admitted for rehab.

**Next Steps.** These are just some of the strategies rehabilitators use to protect wildlife, as well as to reduce the numbers of wild animals needing rehabilitation. Hopefully they may help prompt more ideas. The more strategies that can be used, the greater chance for wild animals to stay healthy and safe in the wild. As a result, rehabilitators can better focus their efforts and time to those truly in need, and more effectively manage their own workload and resources.

Rehab training, publications, and discussions often focus on rehab limited to when we have the animals in our care. Some rehabilitators acknowledge preferring to focus their involvement on ‘hands on’ activities, rather than dealing with the public and responding to questions on individual animal problems. Though at times less tangible, and significantly harder to recognize, are the activities involved with preventative strategies that often result in measurable benefit and lasting impact.

So before the rehab busy season is in full swing, continue brainstorming ways to support wildlife by preventing harm and reducing your workload. Start with small, impactful projects instead of starting with the largest, like changing laws and climate change. Enlist help of other rehabilitators, groups, communities, and agencies. Share materials, information and strategies of ideas, successes, and what didn’t work and needs to be changed. Document what you have done to prevent and reduce problems so you can remember them and appreciate how you have helped those animals and people as well! These strategies do not offer a quick or easy fix, but every little bit can help wildlife and rehabilitators.

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#### **Author**

Shirley Casey of WildAgain Wildlife Rehabilitation, Inc in Colorado has been rehabilitating and responding to the public’s questions about wildlife since 1986. She appreciates the helpful tips from many rehabilitators and the opportunity to continue sharing them. More resources available at <http://www.ewildagain.org/practice.html>

**Resources**

Hadidian, John. 2007. *Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife*. Washington, D.C. Humane Society of the US.

Luther, Erin. 2010. *Answering the Call of the Wild*. Toronto Wildlife Center. Toronto, Ontario.

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<https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/89522.html>