

WILDLIFE REHAB ANNUAL REPORTS: INSIGHTS BEYOND REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

By Shirley and Allan Casey

Wildlife rehabilitators maintain rehabilitation records and submit an annual report of their rehabilitation activity as a condition of their federal wildlife rehabilitation permit, as well as for most states and provinces. With annual reports generally due to wildlife agencies early the next year, many consider such compilations an 'end of year' task. Some rehabilitators question the value of the work and time preparing such records 'only' for wildlife agencies. Actually, annual rehab records can be a very useful tool for the rehabilitator regardless of the extent they are used by the wildlife agency.

Even the minimal information required by wildlife agencies, such as species, date admitted, where found, and disposition/release status (date and location) can provide rich information for rehabilitators. Additional information beyond regulatory requirements is considered essential by many rehabilitators, such as cause of admission; physical condition and health; age; medical condition and treatments; development; weights; caging and behavior. While such detailed records of individual animals are not required by agencies, that information may be invaluable for evaluating the rehabilitator's current efforts and planning future activities. Listed below are some ways rehabilitators have found records useful for much more than just fulfilling a regulatory requirement.

Appreciating accomplishments. As rehabilitators well know, rehabilitating wildlife is a lot of work – over many days, long nights and months. It requires substantial commitment, effort and skill. Reviewing records for the year is a great reminder of the rehabilitator's dedication and effort to help wildlife via returning healthy and strong animals that can survive back to their native habitat. Reviewing annual records also can confirm knowledge gained and improvements in practice versus prior years.

Planning. Records, if kept contemporaneously and in detail, can provide a working history of monthly and weekly totals by species and age of the animals. They show when young of the year were admitted – and when the majority of releases were completed. They confirm when the workload was high and low (otherwise it may feel that the whole year was overwhelming). Anticipating those activities can help with timing of ordering supplies well in advance and avoiding last minute scrambles for diets, supplies and incurring needless costs for last minute shipping. It can help with scheduling extra help and volunteers. Knowing when the workload is lighter enables better scheduling of other activities, such as fundraising, cage construction and maintenance, public education programs, recruiting and training volunteers/new rehabilitators, or even arranging personal vacations.

Caseload. The total number of animals in rehab is one measure of work. The workload required can be influenced by the species, age of animals, health, diets required and so forth. For example, ten fledgling passerines that require feeding every hour generally demand more work than twenty self-feeding ducklings. Neonate (pinkie) squirrels that are fed every three hours – day and night – can be time-consuming as well as interrupt other activities (including sleep). Self-feeding but injured adult animals may take less time for feedings but more attention for supporting recovery from health conditions.

Records that include age of the animal, number of feedings per day, health and medical treatments, and health conditions make it easier to remember workload and to plan future resources. Tracking the age of the animals provides an accurate basis for estimating the number of feedings. Observational notes on the animal's health and types of medical care also are useful data since animals that are injured or ill often require more work, more skilled care and handling, frequent cage cleaning, costs associated with such care, and so forth.

In addition, when many cages and the facility in general are at or approaching capacity, crowded space can make it more difficult to perform regular tasks, such as cleaning cages and ensuring effective quarantines. A high intake and occupancy rate can cause mistakes, fatigue and burnout, especially when the rehabilitator and volunteers are constantly 'shifting gears' and rushing from one rehab animal to another as well as completing other stressful tasks. While it can be difficult to appreciate the pressures and impacts of a very heavy workload when in the middle of it, reviewing the rehab records may allow more objective analysis when the heat of the moment has passed – and identification of future options, such as modifying cages, space and adjusting capacity limits.

Training. Review of rehab records can reveal subjects in which the rehabilitator or volunteers might benefit from extra training. For example, if the records show that many wild animals arrive in shock and dehydrated, it is essential that everyone involved with admissions be familiar with how to provide first aid on those conditions. If records show that there are cases of aspiration pneumonia or GI upset from overfeeding, improved training on feeding may be needed. If the records reveal regular problems with digestion, additional training on diets, quarantine and endoparasites might be useful, as well as a critical review of food (and formula) preparation, feeding protocols and amounts. If the records confirm injuries due to handling or caging difficulties, training on handling and improved cage design would be helpful, as well as reviewing current cage design.

Policy decisions. Review of records may confirm needs and issues, as well as help prompt management decisions. For example, closer examination of records, when not in the immediate and urgent caregiving mode may prompt the bird

rehabilitator to remember that the majority of admissions are passerines and waterfowl, with only a few raptors admitted to the facility. While rewarding and interesting to rehabilitate raptors, it may be harder to fund extra costs and provide large flight cage space for those few raptors when a raptor rehab facility is available within a relatively short distance. The rehabilitator may establish a policy to refer all raptors. Or a rehabilitator may realize that with ever increasing pressures on space, funds, and staffing in ‘busy season,’ a potential option is deciding to not rehabilitate non-native species during that time of year.

Or the records may reveal that considerable resources are being spent on animals that are being ‘rescued’ (aka kidnapped) that may not need help. The rehabilitator may implement or expand educational programs for the public on ways to reduce harm to wildlife (such as keeping cats indoors or arranging for discarded fishhooks and line to be collected), or how to prevent kidnapping of wildlife, or work to return young wildlife with parents through reunions or re-nesting (one home-based rehabilitator reported 100 reunions of juvenile squirrels with their mothers this year!).

Other policy decisions might involve types and length of care for certain species or age animals. For example, a rehabilitator may establish policies for more active referral of animals to someone else with more specialized skills or caging. Other policies could relate to referral of species that might pose higher risk of injury or disease to caregivers (RVS).

Facility planning. Rehabilitators know that rehabilitating wildlife takes physical space for indoor and outdoor cages, storing supplies and equipment, and more. While the amount of space can be related to an annual caseload, the space is also influenced by storage needed even when animals are not in rehab (just ask a rehabilitator about a garage and closets that are full of empty cages and supplies during the ‘off’ season).

Another ‘space’ consideration relates to release locations. Many rehab regulations require that wildlife be released relatively close to its original source location. Such location information is maintained on the rehab record documentation of the individual animals. Some agencies allow wildlife to be released within an established distance of the source location rather than on the exact property where it was rescued/found. Review of the annual rehab records may suggest it is time to search for other good release sites that meet habitat and population needs within regulatory restrictions. This space consideration is especially important if a release site is frequently used, such as from a rehab facility or ‘soft release’ site.

Funding. In addition to reviewing rehab records, it is useful to look at records related to expenses. Can one estimate the costs per animal, or age of animal? Species? How do the expenses relate to previous years? What has prompted changes? Are the changes due to caseload, supply costs,

veterinary expenses? Can those be reduced by changing rehab decisions, practices, capacity planning?

Review of costs also can help with budgeting – and then planning for securing financial resources, whether personal or fundraising. Planning ahead can help reduce stress from last minute scrambles to cover costs. Planning also can help arrange for funds for continuing education/training, other professional growth activities, and membership in professional associations.

And more. Review of annual rehab records may reveal areas that deserve further study and research, such as why more animals are arriving from a particular area related to disease outbreaks, of habitat change, commercial/residential development, exposure to toxins, and so forth. The records may show change in species diversity, or trends of increases or decreases in overall numbers. Or the records may show that rehab hotlines or public messaging about ‘don’t kidnap wildlife’ is successfully decreasing the numbers of animals admitted to rehab.

Conclusion. Many rehabilitators are very busy, moving from one set of demanding tasks to another. Compiling and submitting annual rehab records and reports to the wildlife agency can easily be considered a task to ‘check off’ on the ‘to do’ list. However, these records certainly may be beneficial for other reasons, including to remember, learn from and celebrate accomplishments with wildlife in the present and over the years! And hopefully, the wildlife agencies that receive such annual rehabilitation reports will recognize the amount of work, value and benefits of such information in helping wildlife and people.

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Want to see an example of how this data can provide insights for your individual rehab activity?

An accompanying article on ewildagain.org shows how this data can be easily used to answer such questions such as:

1. Do most animals survive beyond the first 3 days?
2. Do birds have a higher mortality rate than mammals?
3. What is a typical mortality rate in rehab?
4. Do birds die more quickly in rehab than mammals?

If you want to analyze your own data for answers, see how data involving a sample of over 115,000 rehab cases over a ten-year period helped answer these questions for an entire state.