

When Pets Attack Wildlife—Part 3: Talking with the Owner

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Abstract: Rehabilitators receive many calls about wild animals injured by domestic pets. This paper describes considerations to enhance the effectiveness of these conversations.

Keywords: cat bites, dog bites, cats and birds, pet attacks, wildlife hotline calls

INTRODUCTION

As wildlife rehabilitators are well aware, cats and dogs chase, capture, and harm thousands if not millions of wild creatures each year. While some of these wild creatures die immediately, in other cases a person ‘rescues’ the wild animal. Often people assume the wild creature is unharmed and can be immediately released into the wild. Other people recognize an injury and still return the animal to the wild to survive on its own, or “become part of the food chain.” Others call a wildlife rehabilitator for advice and possibly to find a rehabilitation facility to accept the injured animal. This paper discusses some of the considerations involved with handling these conversations.

Stay Calm and Respectful. People calling rehabilitators about injured wildlife may be distraught that his/her beloved pet was aggressive to a wild animal. The person may be worried that the pet might have been harmed. The caller may be upset that a wild animal was harmed and could be in pain. The pet owner

may have been told it is the caller’s ‘fault’ the wild animal was injured. The caller may have had difficulty finding a rehabilitator able to care for the particular species or animal (e.g., due to licenses, location, capacity limits). It is not uncommon for the caller to be frustrated and anxious. The rehabilitator also may feel stressed for a wide range of reasons, including a heavy workload, exhaustion, and frustration with animals being harmed by pets.

The more that the rehabilitator can stay calm, patient, and helpful, the better the chances of helping the rescuer, the wild animal, and the rehabilitator. Calm and informative conversations are more likely to have positive outcomes than hostile statements or emotional confrontations.

Gather Information. While the caller may want the rehabilitator to quickly tell him/her what to do, the rehabilitator needs basic information before making any decisions. Ask the person’s name and contact information in case you need to call back. Ask what type of wild creature and general size: bird, mammal, turtle, etc. Ask specifics about what happened to prompt the rescue. Where did this happen? Since people may call rehabilitators in other cities and states, it is good to know the location before launching into a longer conversation.

Where did they find the animal (outdoors, in garage, in house, etc.)? How do they think the animal got indoors if it was found in a building? Even if they did not see the dog or cat bring the wild creature indoors, is there any chance that a pet had contact with the wild animal? In some cases, the circumstances may provide key information. For example, the cat owner may allow the cat to go outside and then find a young rabbit or fledgling bird in a house—but the owner did not see the cat actually bring the wild creature indoors. While the pet owner may want to believe

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the wild creature found its way into the building on its own, the rehabilitator knows that it is highly unlikely for young wildlife to get inside a house on its own.

Do they have any idea about why the wild animal might have been captured or harmed by the pet? For example, did they see a bird's nest fall to the ground after a storm and see the cat 'play' with the nestlings? Did they see the cat stalking a fledgling bird the person later found in the house? Did they notice the dog dig up a rabbit's nest, and then the person rescued the surviving rabbits? Did the person notice a dead tree squirrel on the road and then a couple days later see a dog or cat carrying a young squirrel?

When did they find the wild animal? How long have they or others had the animal? What has the animal been doing? Sleeping? Vocalizing? Have they noticed any injuries or wounds (bleeding, swelling, limbs that look 'bent' or fractured)? What about parasites on the animal, including fleas, flies, maggots, or other 'bugs'? Did they notice any other health problems?

What type of care or food was provided? How did they feed it? Specifically, what did they feed it? What kind of container have they had it in? Bedding? Has it been on supplemental heat?

In some cases, the caller may have a phone that can take a photo and immediately email it to the rehabilitator. This helps determine species, age, general health and condition, and facilitates a rehabilitator's decisions about the next steps.

While some callers may resist providing any information and just demand immediate rehabilitator action rather than spending (wasting) time on the phone, having complete information helps ensure the most effective decision and action, and ultimately can save time as well.

Decision. After collecting the information, the rehabilitator can make a decision about next steps. A wild animal needs to be admitted to rehabilitation if the cat or dog had contact, or probable contact. If the caller knows the pet had no contact with the animal, the rehabilitator can determine if a renesting or reunion option might work. In other cases, rehabilitators may decide the wild animal needs to be taken to a veterinarian, wildlife officer, other facility (such as taking a domestic rabbit to a rabbit rescue or a domestic goose to a humane society) or another rehabilitator that works with that species.

Time spent collecting information allows the rehabilitator to learn more about the rescuer and his/her observations, attitudes, and receptiveness to wildlife considerations. For example, the rescuer who is eager

to get help and wants to prevent any future problems for wildlife is different from a rescuer who expresses frustration with being asked by a spouse or child to get care for a wild animal the caller views as of little value and a waste of time.

Convincing Caller to Surrender Animal. In some cases, the caller may be eager to surrender the wild creature to a rehabilitator in order to get it help. In other cases, however, the caller may want information to keep and care for the animal. This is when the rehabilitator needs to explain that working with wildlife is especially challenging and very different from working with pets. Explain there can be many medical conditions that may not be obvious and the animal needs to be seen by someone trained and experienced in working with wildlife. Plus, wild animals often hide injuries so as to not appear vulnerable to predation, which results in the animal's death before the rescuer even notices a problem.

Wild animals need special diets and feeding methods, most of which are not immediately available to rescuers (rehabilitators, on the other hand, keep such products available). Any size or age wild animal, even the tiny, 'sweet' baby creatures, can have an extensive variety of parasites or diseases that can be transmitted to pets and humans even though this may not be apparent immediately. Depending on the species involved and/or region, diseases can include distemper, parvovirus, Bordetella, plague, tularemia, hantavirus, rabies, West Nile virus, and chronic wasting disease, to name a few. The specialized caging and facilities necessary for a wild animal to recover from injuries, grow, and prepare for release are not available easily and can be expensive.

While federal as well as state rehabilitation licenses also are required in most areas, unlicensed people who wish to care for and keep wildlife may discount this requirement since they are well-intentioned and do not understand the reasons licenses are required, nor the consequences. As a result, many rehabilitators find it more helpful to emphasize other factors related to animal care than the regulations or violations related to not having a rehabilitation license.

Transport. If the rehabilitator decides that the wild creature needs to be admitted to rehabilitation, which is often the situation after a pet attack, arrangements can be made to transport the animal to a rehabilitator. A small container with air holes and a piece of appropriate bedding provides a safe and secure place for transporting the animal. Explain the importance of minimizing handling of the animal since any wild

animal can injure a person if it tries to defend itself by biting, scratching, and kicking, as well as minimizing possible exposure to parasites or disease, since often it is a tiny baby that cannot bite, scratch, etc. The animal and container should be kept in a quiet, warm place and promptly transported to the rehabilitator (and not left in a hot vehicle). Even if the person is going to be transporting the animal immediately, explain they should not provide any food or liquid since that can result in respiratory or gastrointestinal problems and can complicate other health conditions. Plus, the animal is most likely in shock and not interested in food.

Reduce Future Problems. Cats and dogs that harm wildlife rarely do it only once. Cats are basically predators. If they go outdoors, cats are likely to catch and either play with or kill prey, meaning small creatures. Cat owners may want their cats to have time outdoors and either deny the cat will catch and harm wild creatures, discount the harm to wild individuals or populations, or not be concerned about wildlife.

Owners who love and value their cats, however, may place a much higher priority on the well-being and safety of the cats than on wildlife. Rehabilitators who understand and appreciate the owners' love for their cats are more likely to be able to reduce future problems with wildlife. Explain that cats allowed to roam freely are more likely to be hit by vehicles, get into fights with or be attacked by other animals (including other cats), be exposed to a wide range of diseases and parasites, or even shot. These can cause serious and very expensive health problems. Some cat owners have found 'indoor/outdoor' cat enclosures that allow cats to safely go outdoors but still be contained so they do not incur these risks. Also, a growing number of communities have ordinances prohibiting free-ranging cats and animal control agencies impound these cats and fine the owners.

Dogs running free are more likely to cause problems and harm wildlife than those under an owner's direct control. Most areas have and enforce strict ordinances that address loose dogs. Dogs, like cats, can be hit by vehicles, get into fights, be exposed to diseases such as distemper and parvovirus, and more. While some of the resulting problems may seem more an inconvenience, such as being sprayed by a skunk, other conditions can be serious and expensive, such as being bitten by a coyote, gored or kicked by a deer, or quilled by a porcupine. Keeping dogs under control or in fenced areas can significantly reduce risks to them, and also help wildlife.

In some cases, wild animals come into harm's way because people leave food for pets outdoors.

Depending on the type of animal attracted to the food, a caller should be encouraged to take specific action to reduce potential conflicts between pets and wildlife by not leaving pet food accessible to wildlife.

Discussion Importance. While many rehabilitators would prefer to focus on the 'hands on' aspect of wildlife rehabilitation, talking with rescuers is essential in determining if an animal needs rehabilitation or not. In addition, these conversations are an educational opportunity and can help reduce future problems with wildlife. Conversations with wildlife rescuers may be challenging, especially when a pet has harmed a wild creature, but the opportunity to help that animal as well as reduce future problems are invaluable.

RESOURCES

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