

## **WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS PROVIDE MORE BENEFITS THAN PEOPLE REALIZE**

**By Shirley and Allan Casey**

Benefits and services provided by wildlife rehabilitators often focus on the animals receiving medical care, husbandry and being released back to the wild. Rehabilitation of individual wild animals is a major objective and certainly valuable, especially for animal receiving care! However, wildlife rehabilitators provide a great many other services that benefit both wildlife and people. Here are some examples of ways rehabilitators regularly offer a broader range of equally valuable services beyond direct animal care.

### **Public Service**

**Meets a community need** where the public, agencies, veterinarians and others may take or refer wild animals that are orphaned, injured, ill or in distress in order that they may be given effective care. Research has shown that many members of the public demonstrate a strong emotional response when confronted with a wild animal's pain and suffering, especially if humans were involved in whatever caused the problem. Without an available wildlife rehabilitator and facility, whether home-based or a larger, stand-alone center, many people will do their best to care for the animal themselves, even when there are obvious risks such as injury, parasites and disease. Such commendable efforts by well-intentioned but untrained people often result in significant problems for the animal, as well as injury and disease risks for the caregiver, other people, and wildlife populations.

**Reduce, resolve, or prevent human-wildlife conflicts.** Thousands of people contact rehabilitators each year regarding questions about humans having conflicts with wildlife, such as woodpeckers excavating holes in the sides of houses, geese creating 'messes' on lawns, and raccoons nesting in chimneys. Wildlife rehabilitators educate callers about reasons problems occurred and then provide cost-effective and successful humane solutions for options other than destroying the wild animal. These solutions reduce the time and frustration of people as they consider how best to address wildlife problems and prevent needless expense from pest control or nuisance control operators, as well as save the lives of many thousands of wild animals. By routinely offering this service, rehabilitators significantly reduce the time and resources wildlife agencies have to spend on human-wildlife conflicts.

**Persuade the public to surrender wildlife (aka 'hostage negotiation').** While some people actively seek a rehabilitator to care for a wild animal in need, others may want to care the animal themselves. Rehabilitators can explain the many reasons why the animal needs to be transferred to a qualified rehabilitation facility for assessment and care and convince the rescuer that such an

action is in the best interests of the animal's welfare. In some cases, however, such persuasion is not successful and agency intervention may be needed.

The well-intentioned but untrained person who tries to care for the animal often provides inadequate diet, uses improper feeding methods and keeps the animals in inappropriate caging. The public also tends to habituate wild animals so that they lose fear of humans. The few that survive care by the public may not recognize people or pets as predators, and, thus approach them, often resulting in fear and injury. These habituated wild animals may become nuisance animals and possibly destroyed.

**Help support public health.** Rehabilitators work to get animals away from the public both for the sake of the wild animal and also to reduce the risk of harm to the rescuer, as well as to others the rescuer might show the animal. Rehabilitators collect basic information (name, phone, address, contact with the animal, possible injury/exposure, etc.) from rescuers surrendering wild animals. This information allows the rescuer to be contacted by the local or state health department if risks to human health and safety are identified. In addition, rehabilitators inform the wildlife rescuer about disease risks if there has been an actual or possible exposure, and when they may need to seek preventative or remedial medical attention.

### **Early Warning of Problems Affecting Wildlife**

**Identify environmental risks to wildlife.** Many of the wild animals delivered to rehabilitators have health problems created from human induced changes to the natural habitat. These health conditions may be related to trauma, such as from attacks from cats allowed by owners to roam freely; or from areas littered with improperly discarded fishing line or plastic can holders; or from new construction that can result in flying into a window, or electrocution. In cases such as electrocution, rehabilitators can inform wildlife agencies and utility companies of the problem or, in another example, rehabilitators can work with building managers to reduce risks to large numbers of migrating birds being confused at night by the lights of high-rise towers, thereby crashing into the buildings and falling to the ground. Rehabilitators also identify cases where wild animals have been exposed to various toxins, such as those from illegal use of pesticides and poisons or from contact with contaminated water in uncovered holding ponds sometimes found at construction or drilling sites, or even from oil spills in waterways and oceans.

**Provide early detection of wildlife disease outbreaks.** Wildlife rehabilitators work to identify the causative agent of sick animals, such as common wildlife diseases like distemper, parvovirus, and botulism, as well as zoonotic diseases, or those that can be spread to humans, such as Rabies, Plague, and Tularemia. Rehabilitators also may become aware of people who have 'rescued' an animal from an area with a disease outbreak and then inadvertently



transported it to a new area. This action creates the potential of spreading the disease to healthy wildlife populations, humans, or both. After prompt notification to the wildlife agency or local and/or state health department, the rehabilitator may be further involved with assessment, rehabilitation, returning the animal to its original site, or whatever other action is indicated.

### **Public Information**

**Educate about wildlife and the environment.** Wildlife rehabilitators spend considerable time educating the public and others about wildlife. They provide information to the public in one-on-one conversations when a wildlife rescuer delivers an orphaned or injured animal and they respond to phone calls with general natural history questions, such as opossum pouches, reasons ducks ‘attack’ each other in spring, or how long woodchucks hibernate. Rehabilitators explain about the natural food chain, role of predators, habitat requirements, habitat changes, and much more. Some the education may be ‘general’ such as about natural history and population trends, local issues (e.g., diseases, environmental hazards) and successful actions. They often use examples from rehab experience with individual animals to enhance understanding, empathy and positive action.

**Clarify whether wildlife rescue or action is necessary.** Members of the public may express concerns about wild animals and ask for help. For example, the new birdwatcher may want the rehabilitator to ‘do something’ to keep the hummingbirds from fighting over a hummingbird feeder. Instead, the rehabilitator explains about territoriality and suggests alternatives such as having several areas with flowers that hummingbirds prefer or having several hummingbird feeders spread out over a wider area. Some callers may ask advice about a broader-reaching concern, such as ways to reduce risks to deer that regularly cross a busy highway and often are hit and killed. In these situations, the rehabilitator can refer the public to an appropriate agency.

Rehabilitators also clarify and advise when an intended ‘rescue’ is actually the kidnapping of the rabbit, fawn, or fledgling bird that *does not* need help. Rehabilitators increasingly are known by the public to be concerned with animal welfare, so can educate and influence prevent a rescuer from kidnapping a wild animal that does not need

help or return an already kidnapped young animal to its parent(s).

**Educate and support professionals working with domestic animals about wildlife.** People concerned about wild animals that are injured or orphaned or somehow in trouble often contact veterinarians, animal control agencies, and humane societies who work with domestic animals. While some of these professionals may have limited knowledge of and experience with wildlife, most have little awareness of the ways to respond to the public’s questions about safe and appropriate handling of wild animals. Wildlife rehabilitators offer helpful information and proven techniques and practices for these professionals to use when responding to the public.

**Demonstrate and build stewardship.** Rehabilitators live their personal commitment by expending time, resources, energy and more to help wildlife return to the wild. Their active demonstration of abiding commitment and stewardship is a model for others. Additionally, rehabilitators routinely explain the impacts of humans on wildlife (e.g., pesticides, soiled or contaminated bird feeders, offering improper food) and provide easy solutions to reduce negative impacts. Expanding public understanding and compassion toward wildlife can help motivate people to be better stewards of the environment and take personal action. In addition, many rehabilitators help educate organizations and the media about wildlife issues. Rehabilitators serve as advocates for positive change for wildlife, habitat and people.

### **Wildlife Management and Agency Support**

**Reduce time spent by wildlife agencies handling human-wildlife conflicts.** It takes time considerable and expertise to effectively address human-wildlife conflicts. While some wildlife agencies have staff trained to handle such questions, these rarely are considered a primary responsibility or priority. Many wildlife agencies indicate that they benefit from and appreciate wildlife rehabilitators who work directly with the public on ways to humanely resolve current situations and prevent future human-wildlife conflicts.

**Provide a rehabilitation facility confiscated wildlife.** At times, wildlife officers confiscate wild animals from members of the public and others who do not have appropriate rehabilitation licenses or facilities. Depending

on the case, the wildlife officer may place the confiscated animal with a rehabilitator for assessment, care, and even temporary evidentiary custodianship.

**Provide information to researchers on topics related to wildlife.** Some wildlife rehabilitators provide valuable information to biologists, academics, and others on wildlife health and disease, wildlife population trends, wildlife behavior and natural history (especially the young of the species), effective treatment and care, at-risk species and other topics of interest.

**Assist wildlife agencies with redistribution or relocations of wildlife.** Occasionally rehabilitators have, at the request of wildlife agencies, released rehabilitated wildlife into a specific area in order to boost specific levels. Some rehabilitators have used their knowledge of capturing, handling, and transporting wildlife to support wildlife agencies in relocating large animals such as bears and moose, and during reintroduction efforts.

**Work on habitat, regulations, legislation, resource levels and other activities that impact wildlife.** A number of rehabilitators have worked actively on ways to save and conserve wildlife habitat. Others have been involved with wildlife regulations, policy and legislation, while still others have worked at the state level to encourage increased funding for wildlife agencies.

**Support law enforcement efforts.** Rehabilitators also may become aware of situations involving illegal possession or take of wildlife and notify wildlife agencies.

### **Service to One – and Many**

While people may consider rehabilitators to be primarily involved with the care and release of individual wild animals, wildlife rehabilitators provide a far wider range of services than most people initially recognize or appreciate. These services provide many valuable benefits to wildlife, people, wildlife agencies, and more.

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### **Resources**

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