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# What is a Humane Wildlife Control Service?

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**ABSTRACT:** In May 2007, The Humane Society of the United States launched a for-fee business called Humane Wildlife Services<sup>sm</sup> to engage in wildlife control jobs in the Washington, D.C. metro area. We had several purposes in launching this service. First, we felt it necessary to offer a service to customers in our home base area that allowed them to choose a wildlife removal company that did not trap and relocate, or trap and kill, animals. Second, we wished to directly experience and test the operational and conceptual challenges associated with this sort of service. Third, we wished to develop a model that could eventually be shared with others wishing to provide similar services in their communities. This paper describes how this operation works and discusses some of the concepts underlying what we call a “humane” wildlife service.

**KEY WORDS:** animal welfare, humane, “nuisance” wildlife, wildlife control industry, urban wildlife

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2007, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) started a for-fee business providing services in resolving conflicts with urban wildlife to customers in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Like many businesses in the growing urban wildlife control industry, our Humane Wildlife Services<sup>sm</sup> (HWS) takes calls from customers ranging from private homeowners to commercial businesses. We book jobs to which technicians are sent to deal with complaints, ranging from squirrels in the attic to geese spread throughout a municipal park. Among our purposes in creating this program was to directly experience and attempt to validate principles relating to the “nuisance” wildlife control industry that HSUS had advocated for years and fought legislatively and through other means to enable (Hadidian et al. 2002). These principles revolve around eliminating the suffering and unnecessary deaths of “nuisance” wildlife in urban and suburban environments. One response to our calls for concerted, industry-wide efforts to achieve these goals had often been: “Well, try doing it yourself,” with the implication that it is easier said than done. We have, and we report here the genesis of that project, its basic operational approach, and some of the concepts underlying what we call “humane” wildlife control.

## BACKGROUND

The HWS program was launched on May 1, 2007 by the acquisition and renaming of an existing business, Animals, Community & Environment (A.C.E.) Wildlife Services, LLC. A.C.E. had an existing clientele base and had been servicing jobs in the D.C. metropolitan area since June 2005. Its two operators had been trained under an HSUS grant in Toronto, Canada by staff at AAA Wildlife Control (now AAA Gates Wildlife Control). By December 2007, HWS-D.C. had serviced over 200 jobs and taken 1,000 calls from the public. In August 2007, a second HWS operation was established with the permitting of service providers at the HSUS Cape Wildlife Center in Cummaquid, MA.

## OPERATIONAL APPROACH

The general approach and methodology used in The HWS programs follows that employed by AAA Gates Wildlife Control (Gates et al. 2006). The “humane” approach, as we term it, is an open, adaptively managed set of constructs that represent more a rejection of currently existing practices than an affirmation that either AAA Gates Wildlife Control or HSUS has objectively and concretely determined exactly all procedures embodied by the concept of “humaneness.” We follow the 4-step approach to providing services for wildlife conflict resolution, as exemplified first in Gates et al. (2006). There are: *Inspection/Assessment*; *Removal/Eviction*; *Reunion/Self-Relocation*; and *Exclusion*. Because it is a mission-related activity for HSUS, we provide telephone advice (hotline services) and printed resources, along with job booking in the activity we term *Call Taking*. A brief description of each is provided below.

### Inspection/Assessment

A comprehensive inspection of structures or areas where animal damage concerns or entries exist is absolutely necessary to correctly diagnose and solve home and property owners’ problems. HWS charges a fee for an inspection service that is reimbursable with contracted work. A detailed inspection allows for a comprehensive estimate of all job costs, discovery of conflicts or problems beyond the initial complaint, assessment of potential future conflicts for which preventative measures could be highly cost-effective (e.g., capping a chimney before animal occupancy) and a dialogue between technician and customer so that they come to a mutual understanding about what exactly is recommended and what is suggested for each job in order to solve conflicts for the long term. If a structure is in an advanced state of disrepair, the technician may recommend that the homeowner invest in repairs before animal-proofing occurs. This touches on the issue of full disclosure, not only of job costs, but of other aspects of jobs as well. For example, a homeowner might not be told by some

practitioners that animals removed from buildings will be killed, or that a litter of squirrels that could not be accessed will be left to die in an attic void after the adult is removed and killed. This is neither a proper nor ethical business practice, and we suggest that *transparency* be a key component in any definition of what can be termed a “humane” approach.

### **Removal / Eviction**

If an animal is trapped within a building (for example, a starling trapped in a microwave vent hood), the technician will remove and release it unharmed. With animals freely accessing attics, chimneys, or elsewhere, the approach focuses on forced displacement outside of the structure, with appropriate precautions for the possibility that females with litters may be involved. Considerable variability in displacement tactics occurs, depending not only on the species encountered but on specifics relating to features of the structure as well. Squirrels, being diurnally active, are often outside when the technician enters the attic. Raccoons are typically not, and care is taken to avoid chasing them out when it is unsuitable or when young are present and doing so might reduce reunion success. For both, one-way doors (OWDs) are typically used to ensure that animals inside the structure can get out, but not back in. Cage traps are only set in specific situations when the target animal is truly trapped within a structure or has so much room to roam that it cannot be forced out. Live-trapped animals are always released on site, and traps are never set outdoors.

When young are determined to be present, or even suspected, displacement is not immediately attempted, as efforts must be made to prevent females from relocating litters to inaccessible places within a structure or the scattering of older young so that they cannot easily be retrieved for reunion purposes. As anyone who has ever worked in this field knows, jobs are accompanied by so much variability that it falls to the technician’s experience to determine exactly how the details of the 4-step approach should be applied on a case-by-case basis.

### **Reunion / Self-Relocation**

An important component to what we term the “humane” approach is to either force a female with dependent young to self-relocate (move her litter to another den site) or to remove and reunite the mother with her litter, using a methodology developed by AAA Gates Wildlife Control in Toronto, Canada. This involves the use of a specially constructed “reunion” box (for raccoons) or readily available substitute nesting structures (boxes or plastic jugs for squirrels, starlings, and house sparrows) to ensure that family units are kept together. Litters (or clutches) are removed and transferred into these devices, along with appropriate nesting material. They are then placed outside, proximate to the entrance hole, which is now covered with an appropriately sized OWD (for mammals) allowing the target-animal to exit, but not re-enter. There the mother will find and retrieve them a high percentage of the time, or simply go on with care and feeding if nestlings are involved until they fledge— at which point the nesting

box, in this case, would be removed. Artificial heat is provided if necessary, as on some cold spring nights, and young are evaluated and hydrated on the mandatory follow-up visit the day after the exclusion takes place. If reunions are not successful (allowing typically for upwards of 48 hours for females to retrieve litters), young are taken to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

### **Exclusion**

The ultimate key to successful and “humane” wildlife removal is to completely prevent re-occupancy of the house or structure once an animal has been evicted. Again, following the approach developed by AAA Gates Wildlife Control, we typically use a 16-gauge galvanized screening for exclusion. Regardless of type, it is intended the exclusion material stay for a period of time so that the excluded animal, if she reorients on the previously used opening, confronts this unfamiliar obstacle. The animal can sense the opening previously used but cannot gain access. When and if she challenges it, the material will hold up and the animal will soon stop trying to access the now-obstructed entry point. If repairs were made to original condition immediately following the eviction process, it can be theorized that attempts to regain access might be more concerted. We also follow AAA’s suggestions to use ultra low volume fogging (aerolisolized) in and around entry and denning areas with a deodorizer / enzymatic solution that minimizes the attraction of other animals to the site.

### **Call Taking**

Because HWS does not trap and remove animals, we do not service jobs that others might, as for example when a complaint about raccoons getting into trash is lodged. For many reasons we view this sort of “problem” as more of a trash management than animal management concern. That said, we will make an effort to educate callers with complaints such as these, provide literature when called for, and freely give advice when asked. Others might do so as well, since this builds good community relations, but they also might contract for removal, since there is income to be derived from that, but little or none from merely providing advice. When we cannot service the call according to the customer’s schedule, we supply them with what we consider appropriate industry standards to require of a professional wildlife control company.

## **HUMANE WILDLIFE SERVICES**

The eviction-exclusion-reunion model described above represents an alternative to the trap-remove-kill (or sometimes, relocate) model more commonly practiced in urban wildlife control. The family reunion strategies work to prevent orphaning and keep family units intact by allowing self-relocation within a familiar home range. This can reduce the burden on municipal animal control agencies who accept orphaned litters, if only to euthanize them, or wildlife rehabilitators, who accept and raise young so they can eventually be returned to the wild. Release-on-site allows local populations to be minimally disturbed, which might help mitigate the spread and dissemination of zoonotic diseases as well as stabilize

local populations. Above all, the model allows animals, who have committed no greater offense than to think that a human-built structure provided a safe refuge, to be treated with respect and consideration. This is a central (and critical) construct, in our opinion, in contemporary urban wildlife management and conservation.

For the model proposed here to work, it obviously has to make sense economically. Perhaps the greatest challenges to advancing this concept will lie in this area. To date, HWS has been competitive in its pricing with other companies, to the extent that their pricing is known, and has been well received by its customers. Of course, we have run into the many practical issues that one must contend with in the service business environment, as well as details and obstacles that, because of who we are and what we are attempting, are barriers to immediate profitability. This is exactly what we expected and, in large part, why we decided to engage directly in providing these services.

Currently, we service too wide a geographic area for the size of our fleet, and there is no question that by not trapping, we often spend significantly more time providing a solution on a job than a trapping company might. As we refine the business model and move closer to profitability, it is clear that many practical details remain to be worked out. To that end, we intend to expand our research into “humane” techniques and strategies to be able to empirically validate the “best” approaches that can be offered. This will include research and experiments with new technology in regard to search equipment, one-way door technology, reunion strategy improvements, exclusion material technology, and advances in site access equipment. It is our hope that these will serve the future of this industry in developing best practices. As regards potential impact on the industry, we can only note that within a few months of launching HWS, Critter Control<sup>®</sup>, the largest wildlife control franchiser in the United States, had launched a program called CritterSafe<sup>®</sup>, its own effort to provide nonlethal control to services to customers seeking that approach.

The field of urban wildlife is no longer a novel outlier to the traditional wildlife sciences, but an emergent subdiscipline with its own unique interests and concepts (Adams et al. 2006). Urban wildlife encompasses not only significant social dimensions tied to understanding the attitudes and values of its human component, but ecological and conservation dimensions that can be tied to its management interests as well (Hadidian 2008). Urban wildlife can consist of colonizing (Gehrt 2004), endangered (Cypher 2003), established (Riley et al. 1998) and even overabundant (Curtis et al. 1993) populations, each with its own ecology, each raising different management concerns. It is intuitive to assume that urban wildlife populations interact at the community level, although as yet few studies have confirmed this. If they do, the management of any one species can affect others through the community dynamic. Given that wide-scale trapping and removal of animals in management programs may have far-ranging and non-obvious consequences (e.g., Barton and Roth 2007) it is reasonable to raise concerns about the ecological consequences of traditional urban wildlife control work

and question whether it actually might not actually exacerbate human-wildlife conflicts. Unfortunately, the privatization of much that work and lack of good record-keeping makes it unlikely that an understanding of this can easily be achieved.

Beyond clarifying the biological and ecological consequences of urban wildlife control there is a need for clarification of the ethics involved (Hadidian et al. 2006, Vantassel 2008). Valid questions concerning the ethics of a “humane” approach range from asking whether it is humane to evict a squirrel from an attic in mid-winter (Vantassel 2008) to asking whether a homeowner has an unrestrained right to contract for the lethal removal of a red fox that has done nothing more than walk through her yard early one morning (Hadidian et al. 2006). Animal welfare has long been argued as a first-order concern (Schmidt 1989) in wildlife damage control, and the public interest in humane treatment of wild animals remains an especially important component of urban wildlife management and control (Braband and Clark 1992, Reiter et al. 1999). How to handle or dispose of “problem” wild animals, the potential of wild animals to survive displacement, and the moral responsibility humans hold in recognizing the intrinsic value of other living beings span a continuum along which many other questions concerning the ethics of urban wildlife management are arrayed.

Wildlife damage managers are not the only professionals concerned with the ethics of managing and conserving wildlife. Minter and Collins (2005), for example, call for an “ecological ethic” to deal with what they regard as a critical absence of a systematic effort to address ethical issues in the ecological and environmental sciences. In their vision, animal ethics (consisting of welfare and rights interests) is one of 4 ethical “domains,” including normative (traditional) ethical theory, research ethics, and environmental ethics. They recommend pulling together the broad range of concepts, ideas and constructs that are part of an ecological ethic into a pluralistic framework that represents and respects differing points of view – an approach we advocate as well.

The “nuisance” wildlife control industry has grown well beyond being an offshoot of recreational and commercial trapping and is rapidly becoming a sophisticated and complex service industry that has to take into account not only the values, precepts and interests of its customers, but the actual praxis developing out of consideration of those interests. Humane Wildlife Services<sup>sm</sup> was established, in part, to prompt greater dialogue among practitioners of wildlife damage control about what it means to use the term “humane.” A brief scan of the yellow pages of any major city for services under “pest control” should show that “humane” is becoming more and more prominent in the advertising of urban wildlife control businesses. We wish this might mean that humaneness had become a mainstream concept, but we see it as little more than a marketing tool. That condition can only be corrected by engaging in a strong and pluralistic dialogue about what it means to be “humane,” and moving toward a concrete and objective identification of the scope of urban wildlife control.

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