Wildlife in your shelter

by Sue Pressman

Pressman is director of wildlife protection for HSUS.

When your shelter receives a non-domestic animal from the wild and you must decide what to do with it, your first consideration should be to give it a humane death. This probably sounds surprising, since wild animals are becoming more rare all the time. The wilderness and its preservation are in the news today, and when you receive a wild animal, you have a little piece of wilderness right in your hand.

You may be required to impound a wild animal, or there may be other legal reasons to keep it. If so, the guidelines in the second part of this article will help you care for it.

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But if you have the choice and you are tempted to try to keep any wild animal, ask yourself these questions: What is this animal’s future? Can you maintain it comfortably? Where does it come from and can it go back successfully? What will be its quality of life?

There is no adequate record of the numbers of animals that have re-adapted to the wild after being in captivity. It is cruel for your shelter to guess that somehow the little raccoon or skunk or bird in your hands now will be able to find food and shelter and defend itself in its natural setting after it has become accustomed to your care.

Also, does your shelter staff have hours to spare on a painstaking reintroduction program? It is not fair to ask shelter workers to invest a great deal of time and emotion in a project with a doubtful result.

The slim chance for successful reintroduction to the wild is further eroded by the stress on the animal of being cared for in an artificial way. Animals have specific requirements for proper diet and physical comfort without stress. Shelters set up for the care of dogs and cats may not be able to meet these requirements.

For example, browsing animals have a specific feeding pattern of walking and eating. A shelter would most likely have to keep browsers in a pen and feed them once a day, which is not the schedule their digestive systems are designed for.

Snakes and reptiles have special requirements for comfort and security. They have a narrow range of acceptable temperatures, and they can escape from nearly any container devised by shelter staff. Providing appropriate foods and maintaining body temperatures so the animal will eat is a problem for any facility not specializing in snake care.

Newcomers to photography are often disappointed with the results of their picture-taking efforts because they forget that the camera does not "see" things as they do.

Consider for a moment the vast difference between the function of your eyes and that of the camera. Your eyes always select and center on objects that attract you, and this is done so quickly and automatically that you rarely give it any thought. Other objects in your field of view are out of focus and do not distract from the object you are concentrating on at that moment.

The camera, however, does not see everything and does not "select" objects automatically. This makes it necessary to get closer to your subject than you normally would to eliminate those subjects that distract from the central point of interest.

With a little practice, you can learn to "see" with the camera's viewfinder, taking notice of everything it takes in. Soon, you will be able to isolate subjects with the camera, just as you do with your eyes. To exclude scenery and other distractions in the photo, blur the background by making the camera lens opening larger (a setting of 5.6 or larger).

Just remember: what you see is not always what the camera sees.

When photographing for evidence, it is a good idea to include a highly legible written document in the picture, showing the date and time of the photo, the case identification number, the name of the investigator and any other pertinent information. The identification is especially important when the animal involved may be impounded or otherwise removed from the scene.

Sometimes it is helpful also to include yourself or an associate in the photo to verify that you were indeed present and saw the conditions the animals were subjected to at the time. You should also consider the need for size references.

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IN-TICKET

NAME

ADDRESS

I hereby relinquish all ownership rights to the animal described herein to the custody of

for disposition at their discretion. I certify said animal has not bitten anyone during the last 14 days to my knowledge.

X

(signature) date

DETACH ONE COPY OF THIS LINE TO USE LOWER PORTION AS KENNEL CARD

Give one copy of the form to the person releasing the animal, file one copy by file number and file one copy by the person’s last name.

Also, have the printer perforate the form at the dotted line, and use the lower portion of one copy as a kennel card. Attach it to the cage and make sure it goes with the animal whenever it is moved.

USDA hiring part-time employees

In the last issue of SHELTER SENSE, it was reported that the U.S. Department of Agriculture had postponed a plan to hire part-time employees to assist with enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act. (The Act regulates animal dealers, laboratories, zoos, circuses, airlines transporting animals and other commercial operations.)

The hiring plan has now been approved, and USDA is seeking humanely motivated employees with some practical experience in dealing with animal problems. For complete information, contact Dr. Dale Schwideman, Senior Staff Veterinarian, Animal Care Staff, APHIS-VS, Federal Building, Hyattsville, MD 20782.

Your shelter will receive adorable orphaned animals that will tempt you to try rearing them. But these little animals may be internally injured even though they appear sound. They are suffering the shock and stress of being handled by many people in a noisy, unfamiliar situation.

The young mammals should get their mother’s milk which is much thinner than cow’s milk; and although substitute milks can be purchased for them, even these are not the “real McCoy.” Milks too heavy with butterfat can give them dysentery, which can be fatal if prolonged.

And these orphans will not have an opportunity to learn about survival in the wild. They can seldom be reintroduced to their own kind.

The wild animal pet who suddenly bit its owner, or has simply outgrown its cuteness, usually cannot be reintroduced to the wild. Your shelter should set a firm policy against wild animal adoption.

If an animal brought in from the wild has a broken limb or other medical problem that can be treated quickly and the animal released, then the shelter may want to take the time to do this. If the animal is endangered or regulated for some other reason, the fish and game authorities will be available to assist with its disposition. And if you are impounding a wild animal, the guidelines below will help you maintain it.

But unless the animal is received under special circumstances or you are required to keep it for some legal reason, a painless death must be recognized as a humane disposition for it. The chances for smooth and successful recovery from illness, adoption or survival in the wild are slim. The shelter worker must prevent suffering and maintain the quality of life for animals -- not maintain animal life at any cost.

On those occasions when your shelter must deal with a wild animal, keep the philosophy above in mind. Your first step should be to check with the district game warden. Shelters can encounter as many as 30 species of local mammals and reptiles and 50 species of local birds, plus an occasional “pet” lion or other exotic animal. The game warden can help you identify the animal and tell you if it is endangered or comes under a state or federal regulation.

The exotic, non-native wild animals, such as lions or other big cats, should be turned over to the nearest specialist immediately. Call the zoo or ask the game warden for a reference. In most cases, euthanasia will be specified by the expert. If you must maintain the animal, the specialists can offer some information on care.

From the time the wild animal comes into your shelter, until the time it is disposed of, it should be given warmth, quiet and rest. Treat it like a “patient.”

Don’t allow it to become a plaything or object of curiosity for visitors or shelter staff, or the shelter “scout” animal. Keep it in an area 70-80 degrees Fahrenheit and draft-free, and give it time to rest before offering food.
some cereal filler is best; 100% meat is not necessary in the canned food. Remember that animals called carnivores are not "meat-eaters" but "animal-eaters" -- the food animal is made up of more than just meat.

Pet birds such as parakeets can be fed with commercial foods from the pet store. Most adult birds coming from the outdoors should be examined by a wildlife specialist or permit holder and depending on their condition, returned to the wild or euthanized. An injured bird can be hand-fed canned dog food, but this is difficult on both bird and shelter worker, and the results may not be successful. If you do try to rehabilitate an injured bird, you can also collect insects, berries and other natural foods for it.

Carnivorous birds (such as migratory songbirds and birds of prey) will probably come under a federal or state regulation and should be reported and turned over to the fish and game department. Until they claim it, they will advise you about feeding requirements. Young birds can generally be hand-fed canned dog food with cereal filler.

Wild rabbits can be difficult, but they will generally accept the rabbit pellets sold in pet shops. Carrots with a very occasional green are fine. Rabbits also like nibbling dry cat or dog food.

The use of commercial products for feeding wild animals can help prevent dietary upsets. These products have been tested and used extensively and found to be safe. "Home remedies" can be successful, but should be used carefully with precise recordkeeping on the foods consumed and the result.

A nature center or an amateur bird or snake expert may be able to take the wild animal that comes into your shelter. If you become aware of amateur naturalists willing to assist, check their holding facilities and try to verify their knowledge before turning any animals over to them. Try to prepare a list of naturalists and other resources that you can refer to quickly when a wild animal comes to you.

The special problems of feeding young animals have been mentioned above. Commercial imitation milks such as Borden's Esbilac are available for young mammals. Another substitute for "mother's milk" is four parts canned milk cut with three parts tap water and one part lime water. (Lime water adds mineral stability and is available at the drug store.)

If you must hold a young deer, remember that they can begin to nibble grain at two weeks of age; supply them with commercial cattle or calf chow and water.

Again, these diets are for temporary use while you arrange a permanent disposition.

Some of the most common wildlife shelter visitors have been discussed here; however, if you have questions about animals not covered, feel free to write or call me.

Finally, we recommend you get a copy of Care of the Wild, Feathered & Furred: A Guide for Wildlife Handling and Care, by Mae Hickman and Maxine Guy (Unity Press, PO Box 1037, Santa Cruz, CA 95061, $7.95). This book will help you identify and care for the wild animals you must hold.