



10 Tips

Every Wildlife Rehabilitator Should Know



Being a wildlife rehabilitator requires unswerving dedication and countless hours to effectively treat sick, injured, and orphaned wildlife. But truly successful efforts must be grounded in both well-founded knowledge and hands-on experience. The following tips can help ensure you and your wildlife rehabilitation team are operating ethically and efficiently.

1. Stress Kills

Catching a wild animal causes immense stress on its system. "Capture myopathy," as it is called, is a disease complex that can result in severe muscle damage due to extreme exertion or struggle. Keeping stress at a minimum is vital for patient recovery. A rehab center is an unfamiliar and unnatural sensory smorgasbord for wildlife. This environmental stress coupled with the animal's injury or illness can take a patient well beyond its normal threshold for enduring trauma. Keep patients in a quiet area. Use low voices and limit handling. Play a background noise machine, and keep certain species out of sight and hearing of one another.

2. Hands-off is Best

When animals come in for care, know how to triage the real emergencies. Consider shorter initial evaluations, but observe the patients over the next few hours or days. Adrenaline will hide illness on admission. When possible, let critical animals rest in a warm, quiet spot to calm down before administering treatment. Allow more stable wildlife settle into the new environment after a full evaluation. Maintain a hands-off approach throughout every part of the rehab process. This not only limits stress, but also minimizes human imprinting and habituation.

3. Provide All Four Basic Needs

Most wild animals have four basic needs: nutrition, shelter, security and enrichment. Rehab centers easily provide nutrition and shelter, but security and enrichment are just as vital for easing the animal's time in captivity. Depending on the animal's species, age and other factors, consider providing hiding places, nests, or foster parents. Put orphans of the same species together, add natural branches and plant materials. Allowing your patients to feel safe, secure and comfortable will ensure a better outcome.



4. Maintain Solid Relationships with Veterinarians

Wildlife rehabilitators are a self-sufficient breed, relying on their personal knowledge and experience to effectively help wildlife. However, maintaining good ties with a veterinarian is also vital for success. He/she will be invaluable for discussing cases, offering treatment strategies, and helping you manage difficult patients. A strong veterinary partnership can also safeguard the longevity of your rehab organization.

5. Self-Care Helps Patient Care

One of the first things I learned when I began in this profession is that you cannot rescue an animal if you yourself need "rescuing." Don't put yourself in harm's way. We all know the dangers of compassion fatigue, yet too often we continue to push ourselves through difficult, sometimes heartbreaking situations, while enduring long days and back-breaking work. We are driven to save animals and alleviate their suffering, but we must know our own limits. Don't take on more animals than you can handle – ask for help, and make sure you are giving yourself enough downtime. Learn to say no. You will be able to save more lives overall when you take care of yourself first.

6. Wildlife Rehabilitators Come in All Sizes

While large rehab centers are often the “face” of the industry, especially with their ability to care for hundreds of animals, home-based rehabbers provide an equally valuable type of care. These smaller operations often specialize in one or two species or can provide round-the-clock care. There is no right way to rehabilitate animals. In fact, we believe the ideal wildlife rehabilitation model would be for larger centers and home-based rehabbers to more frequently collaborate and cross-refer.

7. Let the Public Help You to Help Wildlife

We enter this field because we love animals, but we also quickly learn there is a significant human component to what we do. We deal with people who are highly emotional about finding injured or orphaned animals. We deal with conflicts between wildlife and humans. We deal with well-intentioned people who don't always make the best choices for wildlife they encounter. While communicating effectively with the public can be a challenge, knowing how to calm and educate them is very important. (Check out the excellent reference book “Answering the Call of the Wild” by Erin Luther, Toronto Wildlife Centre.) Our interactions with the public can have a lifelong impact on helping wildlife.



8. Release Should be About the Wildlife

Releasing an animal back into the wild is one of the most stressful components of wildlife rehabilitation, both for the rehabilitator and the animal. Much time, energy and effort go into preparing an animal for release. It must be captured, handled and evaluated, and then transported to the release site. Your team should take every precaution to ensure the animal's best chance for survival. For example, if the animal is nocturnal, a daytime release is likely not what's best for its survival, despite the positive publicity the event could generate for you.

Consider how many of one type of species you plan to release at one time; overloading the ecosystem can have a negative impact. Always release an animal into suitable habitat away from roads or other dangers. Make sure you release into the area where the animal was found to minimize risk of spreading disease. Lastly, consider the physical method of release. For example, we believe there are far more humane ways to release raptors and other birds than just by tossing them into the air.

9. Create a Support System

Surround yourself with a positive network of friends, family and professionals who support you and your mission. Check your state's regulatory website for helpful information about becoming a licensed rehabilitator. Consider joining organizations like the Rocky Mountain Wildlife Alliance (RMWA), the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC) and the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA) for continuing education and networking support.

10. Work Together

No matter how many other wildlife rehabilitators and organizations there are, remember, there is no such thing as competition in this profession. When like-minded people work together, we create a stronger, more professional, and more powerfully united mission for us all.

