Wildlife in your shelter

by Sue Pressman

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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.
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 readapted 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, 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, sees 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, stating 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.
IN-TICKET

NAME ___________________________ PHONE ___________________________

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

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THIS ANIMAL, NOTE FILE # AND INQUIRE AT FRONT DESK:

cold short long curly wavy county/city tag #: rabies tag #: FILE #: type of collar: if found, where

docked long ring bushy if surrendered, reason:

tail

cropped pricked bound

ears

small medium large pub

size

housebroken good with children good with dogs

yes no

neutered health: good poor vaccinations, dates:

yes no

kennel: dog cat other

color breed

male female age

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 Schwindaman, Senior Staff Veterinarian, Animal Care Staff, APHIS-VS, Federal Building, Hyattsville, MD 20782.
Some of the more common animals to come to your shelter will be skunk, raccoon, squirrel, chipmunk, possum, fox, rabbit and such non-native visitors as the coati-mundi. From time to time, you may have to maintain an impounded wild animal, or keep one for some other legal reason. Animals old enough to eat on their own are easier to care for than nursery animals, which will be discussed later in this article.

For the wild animal you are required to maintain, a nutritional and palatable diet can be created with "in-stock" or readily available supplies: dry and canned dog and cat food, primate chow (such as monkey chow) and canned fruit cocktail (packed in water or with the syrup rinsed off before serving).

Keep in mind that you are holding the animal only temporarily so a long-term prime conditioning diet is not necessary. In many cases, even the maintenance diet you serve may be the best food the animal has had since it got into the situation that brought it to you.

The "chow" products as well as dry dog and cat foods are designed for the specific animal named; however, they are a satisfactory food for the exotic animal on a temporary basis. All these foods are cereal-based, a major food requirement for the majority of mammals coming into the shelter.

You can offer your wildlife visitor both dog and monkey chow to see which is preferred. The consistency can be softened to "wet cookie" stage by adding hot water and draining, accommodating little teeth not designed for large chunks of food. Canned fruit cocktail adds the food interest needed by some species such as monkeys, without the shelter spending money on fresh fruit not necessary for proper diet.

Turtles and iguanas need food interest also; softened monkey chow and fruit cocktail are satisfactory, but these animals can have a hard-boiled egg or cut lettuce leaves. Reptiles that require high protein in the form of insects or meat can be fed canned dog or cat food. The food containing 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.