



The Deadly Truth about Trash

HSUS animal caretakers see litter's lethal dangers

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

As a wildlife rehabilitator, Renata Schneider has seen a number of trash-related injuries—birds poisoned from lead weights, skunks with yogurt containers stuck on their heads, birds' eyes poked out from fishing hooks. But the worst case she remembers was a raccoon whose paws were stuck in beer cans.

"The cans had been on his limbs for so long that he had tried to learn to walk with them, and both front limbs were completely damaged," says Schneider, a veterinarian at

the SPCA Wildlife Care Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "We sedated him and took the cans off his hands, which were nothing but raw flesh anymore. There was no fur, no skin, and he was alive and getting around, but thin."

The animal's condition was so poor that he had to be euthanized. Though the center's employees are able to save many of the 14,000 animals admitted annually, most of the raccoons suffering from can injuries or entangled in plastic six-pack rings are not

so lucky. "The trash slices them up, and by the time they come in to us the injuries are so advanced that we can't do much for them," Schneider says.

The statistic highlights the lethal dangers posed by some of the 250 million tons of trash discarded by Americans every year. While much of this garbage is hauled to landfills, a large amount makes its way into the natural environment. In West Virginia alone, according to the state's transportation department, a two-mile stretch of highway yields around 32,000 pieces of refuse. Debris also clogs the oceans; the Ocean Conservancy's 2008 International Coastal Cleanup garnered 3.7 million pounds of trash along 9,000 miles of U.S. shorelines in a single day. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a huge conglomeration of plastic and other nonbiodegradable flotsam swirling off the California coast, is estimated at anywhere from twice as big as Texas to larger than the U.S.

This ubiquitous trash provides an ample banquet for wild animals displaced into developed areas due to shrinking habitats. Unfortunately, the simple act of satisfying hunger pangs often ends in injury or death. Plastic items become intestinal blockages; baited fishing lines entangle limbs, hindering movement and causing dismemberment; and aluminum cans with leftover soda or beer turn into razor-sharp traps.

Litter is also an indirect killer. Tossed from car windows, it puts curious animals in the path of oncoming vehicles. "The majority of what we see is casual garbage, the things that are cast off on the side of the road—the convenience food, wrappers, and bottles," says Robbie Fearn, director of The HSUS's Cape Wildlife Center in Cape Cod, Mass. "For years, I would throw my apple cores and other food out the window of my car, thinking it's going to compost and go back into the wild, never considering the fact it's actually drawing animals who might then get hit by a car." This roadside garbage has a domino effect, Fearn says. "In the case of raptors, the garbage attracts rodents, and then the bird goes

after this prey and gets hit by a car.”

Trash can also create conflict between people and hungry wild marauders. In Connecticut, two raccoons scrounging in a garbage bin were cruelly dealt with by the owners of a dry cleaning store, says Laura Simon, field director of The HSUS’s Urban Wildlife Program. “Instead of securing the lid to prevent the animals from getting in, they poured gasoline into the dumpster and lit the raccoons on fire,” she says. “It became a huge animal cruelty case that easily could have been avoided.” The raccoons were euthanized due to the severity of their burns.

Animals injured by trash are regularly admitted at the Fort Lauderdale facility, which will become part of The HSUS’s family of animal care centers when a corporate combination is finalized this year. All bird patients are X-rayed for fishing hooks; young pelicans are especially susceptible because of their curiosity and appetite for an easy meal, says Schneider. “We call them the juvenile delinquents because they get into



X-rays at the SPCA Wildlife Care Center often reveal fishing hooks stuck in the bodies of pelicans and other animals.

fishing hooks and lines left on the pier, and they nose through trash. They come in all wrapped up in fishing wire.”

Pelicans typically have a high rehabilitation success rate, but hooks that pierce joints cause untreatable infections.

Schneider recently euthanized two young pelicans with such injuries. “This is the beginning of their life and it’s just heartbreaking to have to euthanize a young animal because of fishing line,” she says.

Turtles and birds who ingest hooks also face a grim outcome. On a good day, the hook can be extracted while the animal is under anesthesia. “This kind of procedure is difficult with turtles, though, because it requires deep sedation and surgery,” Schneider says. “If the hook is in the neck, it can get ugly because the turtle will sometimes pull itself back into the shell.”

The exact number of trash-related fatalities among ocean species is anyone’s guess, says Sharon Young, The HSUS’s marine issues field director, but “what is not conjecture is the array of species affected by it.” Stranded whales, turtles, dolphins, and manatees have been found with plastic bags in their stomachs or dead from entanglement. In Hawaii, more than 1,000 small pieces of plastic were found in the stomach

Marine animals become entangled in nets and fishing wire, and their stomachs are sometimes filled with plastic and other trash.





Five Tips for Cleaning Up Your Act

1. FOLLOW ROAD RULES: Even small and seemingly innocuous items can harm wild animals. “Don’t leave anything behind, not even your cigarette butts in the sand,” says Sharon Young, The HSUS’s marine issues field director. “Bring a container and just take it all home with you.” Avoid throwing food scraps along the roadside. They may seem like the makings of compost, but they can entice hungry animals directly into harm’s way.

2. RINSE AND CUT OR CRUSH: Clean and cut up or crush potentially dangerous items (such as yogurt containers that can trap animals’ heads) before throwing them in the garbage or recycle bin. “Anything that has food residue is like putting bait out at a trap, and you are in essence drawing the animals to a dangerous situation,” says Robbie Fearn, director of The HSUS’s Cape Wildlife Center in Cape Cod, Mass. Snip apart six-pack rings, crush aluminum and tin cans flat, and put lids on containers that still smell of food but can’t be crushed.

3. COVER AND SECURE: Dispose of trash in a securely covered container. To further discourage scavengers, place garbage out for collection the morning of trash pickup instead of the previous night. To secure the trash can lid, strap a bungee cord across the top and attach it to the handles on either side. Dumpsters, too, should be securely covered.

4. REDUCE AND RECYCLE: Buy minimally packaged products and avoid single-use packaging. Compost your food waste, and carry reusable bags and cups for purchases. Look for post-consumer recycled material when shopping.

Many items not normally picked up on recycling day can still be recycled. Take packing peanuts to shipping stores, bring batteries to battery recycling centers, and mail empty printer cartridges back to the manufacturer. Even junk mail can be made into products such as kitchen counters. When in doubt about what you can recycle, contact your local government recycling program.

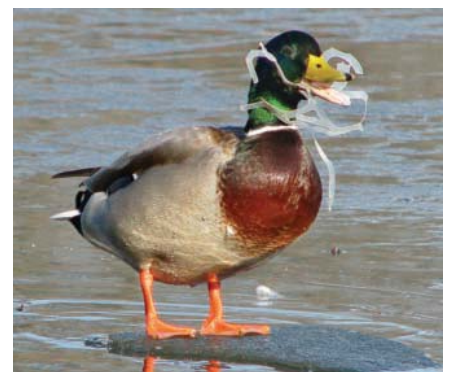
5. ANSWER THE CALL OF DUTY: Get involved in community projects such as the Ocean Conservancy’s International Coastal Cleanup. Turn others’ trash into your chance to help the animals you treasure. “In college, I had a rule that I instituted in my life, where every day I pick up at least one piece of trash,” Fearn says. “That way I’ve picked up 365 pieces of trash a year. If everyone did this, then all that stuff that gets thrown out wouldn’t be there anymore.”

of a sea turtle. Perhaps the most famous case involved a pygmy sperm whale stranded off the New Jersey coast in 1993. Inky, as she was called, had 3 square feet of plastic clogging her stomach. She survived, but many do not.

Marine animals even ingest items such as bottle caps and lighters. “Cigarette butts contain nicotine and are toxic if eaten. They also don’t degrade,” says Young. “Animals end up eating a lot of them because they look like fish eggs when the outer wrapping unravels, and they can fill up the animal’s stomach and remain undigested. Birds also feed these items to their young, who often starve to death with their stomachs full of plastic.”

While working on whale watch boats as a naturalist in the 1980s, Young often saw trash even far out to sea. “We’d be 20 miles from shore and find balloons floating out there on the water,” she says, explaining that a floating balloon with streamers looks much like a jellyfish with tentacles. “We used to scoop them up out of the water and had balloons with logos from as far away as Ohio. One time we found 60 balloons from a politician running for office in Connecticut. We called to let her know, and she was incredibly embarrassed about it.”

Young suggests balloon-free celebrations as one way to reduce the toll caused by trash. She also recommends using reusable shopping bags, as well as washing items that are to be recycled and securely storing them so they’re not carried off by the wind—or curious critters. “This is not an academic exercise,” she says. “We have this silent epidemic in terrestrial and marine wildlife, and this stuff doesn’t just go away.”



Great Dishes for Summer Grilling

If you've been thinking about cutting back on animal-based products, summer is the perfect time for whipping up some great plant-based meals. In this debut of the *All Animals* recipe section, we provide instructions for creating a meatless backyard barbecue burger using tender and juicy marinated portabella mushrooms. Serve with grilled veggie kabobs and a fruit salad, and you've got all you need for a satisfying summer cookout. For more recipes—including dessert suggestions such as miniature apple pies—visit humanesociety.org/humaneeating.



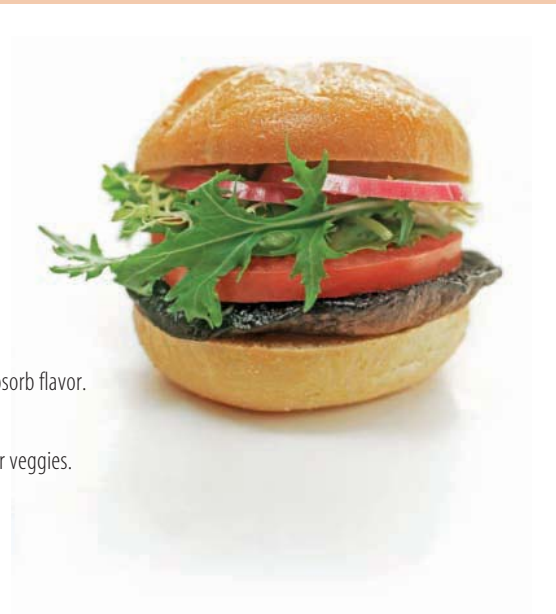
Grilled Portabella Mushroom Burgers with Veg Kabobs

Grilled Portabella Mushroom Burgers — Serves 4

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 4 large portabella mushroom caps | 4 teaspoons balsamic vinegar |
| ½ cup teriyaki sauce | 4 teaspoons olive oil |
| ¼ cup pineapple juice | 2 or 3 cloves garlic, minced |

1. Remove stems from mushrooms, but leave the gills.
2. Combine teriyaki, pineapple juice, balsamic vinegar, olive oil, and garlic in bowl.
3. Place mushroom caps, gills facing up, in a casserole dish or other deep dish.
4. Spoon teriyaki marinade over mushroom caps. Let mushrooms soak for at least 20 minutes to absorb flavor.
5. Place on a low flame and cook until heated through.

Serve on rolls or burger buns and top with lettuce, tomatoes, red onion, salsa, avocado, and/or other veggies.



Veg Kabobs — Serves 4 to 6

Recipe courtesy of Compassion Over Killing; cok.net

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 zucchini cut into large cubes | 1 red, yellow, or green pepper cubed |
| 1-2 cups button mushrooms whole or cut in half | 1 onion cut into chunks |
| 12-16 cherry tomatoes whole | Any oil-based salad dressing or your favorite marinade |

Options: 1 cup of cubed fruit, such as pineapple, or meatless product such as White Wave's Chicken-Style Seitan, Tofurky's gourmet sausages, or Gardein's Chicken Bits.

1. Marinate the vegetables in the salad dressing or marinade for at least an hour.
2. Thread onto skewers, alternating the vegetables with any one of the above-listed options.
3. Grill over medium heat for 5 to 7 minutes, rotating halfway through.