

More About Wildlife Rehabilitators

By Sharon St. Joan

Caring for wildlife requires very special training; licensed wildlife rehabilitators have that training. A licensed wildlife rehabilitator may either work at a wildlife center or independently from home.

A licensed wildlife rehabilitator works with a wildlife veterinarian. They constitute a team, and together they determine what course of treatment is best. In some cases, veterinary care is not needed, and the rehabilitator is solely responsible for the care of the bird or animal.

The goal of wildlife rehabilitation is to release the orphaned or injured bird or animal back to the wild whenever possible. Sometimes, as in the case of a very disabling injury, it may be unkind to keep a wild bird or animal alive in captivity. These decisions can only be made by a wildlife rehabilitator, so it is important to trust that the rehabilitator will help the bird or animal in whatever way is kindest and best for the animal.



Adult pygmy owl about to be released back to the wild

It is illegal for anyone without a government permit to possess wildlife. However, you are legally allowed to pick up orphaned or injured wildlife for the purpose of transporting the bird or animal to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

What do I need to know about working with a wildlife rehabilitator in an emergency?

- If you have found a wild bird or animal who is very clearly injured, in most cases you should confine the bird or animal before calling the rehabilitator. For guidelines on how to do this, please read the appropriate resource: “Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 2,” “Rescuing Adult Songbirds,” or “Rescuing Wild Mammals: Part 2.”
- If you are in doubt about whether the bird or animal actually needs help, call the rehabilitator first to ask for advice. If you read the other resources in this section ahead of time, you will be better prepared in an actual wildlife emergency.
- Tell the rehabilitator what type of animal you have (bird, bird of prey, mammal or reptile), and ask if you can bring the animal to him or her. Ask for advice about the best method for transporting the bird or animal.
- You may need to leave a message on an answering machine. If your call is not returned within half an hour, call again or contact another rehabilitator.
- If the rehabilitator does not accept the kind of animal you have, ask him/her to refer you to another rehabilitator who does accept that animal.

- Be sure to get clear driving directions. In some cases, particularly if you have found a bird of prey, they may send someone to pick up the animal. But in most cases, you will need to bring the animal to the rehabilitator.
- Do not give the bird or animal any food, water, or treatment, unless you are specifically asked to do so. In most cases, this will be more harmful than helpful to the bird or animal.
- If the rehabilitator will accept the animal, transport the bird or animal to the rehabilitator's location immediately.
- Finally, always follow the advice of a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Caring for wildlife requires very special training and licensed wildlife rehabilitators have had that training.

How can I be prepared for a possible wildlife emergency?

Don't wait for an emergency to find out what to do! Calling in advance to get to know the people in your area who care for wildlife is an excellent idea. Here are some things to consider when you call:

- Wildlife rehabilitators deal with emergencies frequently, especially during the spring and summer. Be understanding if they don't have time to chat at the time you call. You may need to call back later.
- Explain that your call is not an emergency and that you are calling because you want to be prepared in case you do encounter injured wildlife.
- Ask what type of wildlife they accept for treatment. Some take in all wildlife; some take in only birds, only mammals, or only reptiles; a few will take in only a particular species. They will usually be able to refer you to another rehabilitator who can take in the kinds of wildlife that they do not accept.
- Ask for the quickest way to reach them in an emergency; also, ask what hours and days they are available. Ask what you should do if you find wildlife at a time when they are not available, such as late Sunday evening.
- If you'd like to help them, donations and volunteer work are generally very welcome, but they are never required.

For more information, please see the other wildlife resources in this section of the website, or call Best Friends Animal Society. Thank you for caring about wild birds and animals!

Sharon St. Joan established Feathered Friends at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary and has cared for birds and wildlife for over 15 years. She now devotes her time to writing about birds and wildlife-related issues.