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P.I.G.E.O.N.

The basic elements of assessing a wildlife casualty

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Introduction

The pigeon is a common wildlife casualty in veterinary practice and serves as a useful mnemonic for the basic elements to consider when assessing the suitability of any wildlife casualty for rehabilitation…

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P.I.G.E.O.N.

P.T.S.

Information

General appraisal

Examination

Observation

Next?

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P.T.S.

Wild animals are likely to be severely compromised to allow capture. The potential necessity for euthanasia should be remembered at all points of their assessment.

A wild mammal which has not run away following a road traffic collision is likely to be suffering from extensive injuries, such as fractures in multiple limbs, spinal or pelvic trauma, or concussion (shown here, a fox).

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P.T.S.

Whether we euthanase, euthanise or ‘put to sleep,’ euthanasia is unfortunately a frequent occurrence when we are dealing with wildlife casualties. It’s importance as a welfare tool should be remembered throughout their assessment; it is poor welfare to persevere with an animal that is likely to die or need to be P.T.S. during rehabilitation.

Unless it is young, and not yet fully mobile - or it’s a hedgehog - a wild animal is likely to be severely compromised to enable capture.

Conversely, a rehabilitated wild animal must be completely fit and healthy to survive and compete in the wild.

As a result, only around 40% of wildlife casualties are likely to be successfully rehabilitated and released back into the wild. Of these, the majority are animals which were problem-free on presentation (e.g. orphaned clutches of mallard ducklings) - not the ones with obvious injuries or disease.

Information

Remember to ask the finder for all the relevant information.

Who?

What?

Why?

Where?

When?

How?

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Information

Wild animals have no owners. We rely on the finder to provide any information; this will help guide your subsequent examination and decision making and is vital for the successful release of many animals.

Who: take the finder's name and contact details in case further information is required (e.g. regarding the finding location, to facilitate the return of the animal to private property, or for legal reasons in the event of wildlife crime).

What: what is the animal? This may not be correct!

Why: why has the finder picked the animal up? If they thought there was an issue with its movement or behaviour, find out what they observed - with bigger species, it can be difficult to assess these things in the confines of a consult room.

Where: it is often important to be able to return animals to their territory and it assists with your examination to know if the animal was found next to a road, by patio doors, under power-lines, on a fishing lake etc., and hence is likely to be suffering from particular issues.

When: when was the animal picked up? Has it been compromised (e.g. without food and water) for some time?

How: how have they dealt with it? Consider zoonoses, diseases that may spread to the finder's pets, what the finder may have fed it etc.

General Appraisal

It is important to make a prompt general appraisal of the animal, particularly if it cannot be examined immediately.

Herring gull with left wing twisted around compound fracture, in need of immediate euthanasia.

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General Appraisal

Confirm the identity of the animal and assess its age and immediate requirements; young animals, like nestling birds, will deteriorate very quickly if not provided with supplemental heat, even for short periods.

If the animal looks badly injured or appears to be in severe distress, euthanasia should be performed. Have everything prepared before handling it.

Consider handling-associated risks (zoonoses and risk of injury from teeth, talons, beaks, antlers etc.). Wear appropriate PPE. If necessary, use a towel to cover the animal while restraining it properly. Some species, such as badgers and otters, should not be handled conscious, and will require sedation (once stabilised).

Weigh the animal when removing from the carrier and assess its body condition. Underweight mammals will have obvious bony prominences, as per a cat or dog. Hedgehogs in good condition should appear round. Birds will generally have a convex chest profile when in good (normal) body condition, and a concave profile, with a prominent keel bone, when thin/emaciated.

Emaciated animals have been compromised for some time and have a correspondingly more guarded prognosis. Emaciation may suggest an underlying problem in an animal which has been presented for another reason, such as predation.

Check the carrier for abnormal droppings, blood, and ectoparasites.

Examination

Restraining the animal carefully, perform a systematic and thorough examination so that nothing is missed.

Restraint of a tawny owl: the wings are restrained by holding the owl against the handler's body. The legs are restrained from beneath, with the index finger between the legs, and the hocks locked in position.

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Examination

The animal should be restrained to avoid injury to the handler and the person performing the examination, but also to the animal (e.g. by restricting breathing in birds by preventing chest excursions, damaging important flight feathers etc.).

Focus on the presenting problem initially, if one is obvious. If this is something from which the animal can recover, proceed to examine the rest of the animal in a systematic and thorough fashion, so that nothing is missed. If, at any point, an issue is found which will preclude release, the examination should be terminated, and euthanasia should be performed.

Trauma is the most common presenting problem and should always be ruled out, in every single case. Even apparently uninjured ‘orphans’ are frequently suffering from cat bites, injuries associated with falling from nests, etc.

Listen to the animal for respiratory noise and abnormal vocalisations, and smell for infected wounds, flystrike, and contaminants (particularly useful in a curled-up hedgehog).

The examination should be complemented with a period of observation.

Observation

A period of observation should form part of every examination.

Gull chicks found on the ground have frequently fallen some distance from their nest site; lameness evident on observation may indicate the presence of a fracture of the distal tarsometatarsus.

Observation

It is impossible to observe many abnormalities with the animal ‘in the hand’, so, unless there is already an obvious reason for euthanasia, observation of the animal ‘loose’ on the floor of a secure room should form part of the examination, where possible. (Such detailed observation will not always be possible with large mammals and birds - hence the importance of getting information from the finder.)

Observed abnormalities are very useful for focussing the examination in the hand further, and in practice it may be useful to perform this part of the examination once obvious problems have been ruled out, before completing a more thorough examination.

Ensure doors and windows are closed/locked, and there is nowhere for the animal to escape. Pull blinds down to prevent birds flying into windows. Have a towel at hand to recapture the animal.

Wild animals will attempt to hide any signs of weakness to avoid predation, so observe quietly for a moment or two, before gently encouraging to move if necessary.

Observation

Lameness will obviously suggest an issue with a leg, with birds coming down heavily on their uninjured leg.

The position of an abnormally held wing can be used to locate the problem: a raised wing (held across the back) suggests an issue affecting the pectoral girdle (shoulder joint), a slightly dropped wing suggests a problem around the elbow, and a wing which is trailing on the floor suggests an injury to the carpal/metacarpal area.

Birds may attempt to fly - recently fledged birds may have weak or non-existent flight, however, any attempts, or flapping, should appear symmetrical.

Behavioural abnormalities may include ataxia, circling, bumping into obstacles, or a head tilt. Some issues will require a knowledge of what is normal for that species (for instance, it is common for a hedgehog to circle initially after uncurling), while others, such as torticollis in a pigeon with paramyxovirus, are much more obviously ‘wrong.’

Next?

The animal must be looked after properly in the short-term and there must be somewhere with the appropriate facilities and expertise to undertake the next stages of rehabilitation.

A large aviary is necessary for flight assessment and building fitness. (The video shows the final stage of the rehabilitation of tawny owlets, in a purpose-built flight aviary.)

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Next?

Is the animal fit to undergo rehabilitation? If so, what are the next steps?

Is there somewhere with appropriate facilities and expertise for the animal to go for rehabilitation? The requirements for many species can be extensive, for instance, large aviaries and pools.

Do you have appropriate facilities to care for it in the short term?

Dehydration and hypothermia are very common in wildlife casualties so provide warmth and fluid therapy. Warmth will also be vital during transport to a rehabilitation facility for small, young animals, such as nestlings.

Appropriate antibiotics and analgesia should be provided if injuries are present. Consider contraindications such as dehydration or pregnancy.

Ensure the pet carrier is suitable for transport, with towelling on the base to provide grip. It should be of a suitable size and construction to prevent feather damage (avoid wire cages), and it should be escape-proof.

Next?

If in any doubt about your findings, please contact your nearest RSPCA Wildlife Centre for advice. Ideally, take photos and videos of the animal which can be forwarded to the appropriate email address (given during the call) for assessment.

South-West England:
RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre
0300 123 0721

North England:
RSPCA Stapeley Grange Wildlife Centre
0300 123 0722

East England:
RSPCA East Winch Wildlife Centre
0300 123 0709

South England:
RSPCA Mallydams Wood Wildlife Centre
0300 123 4999

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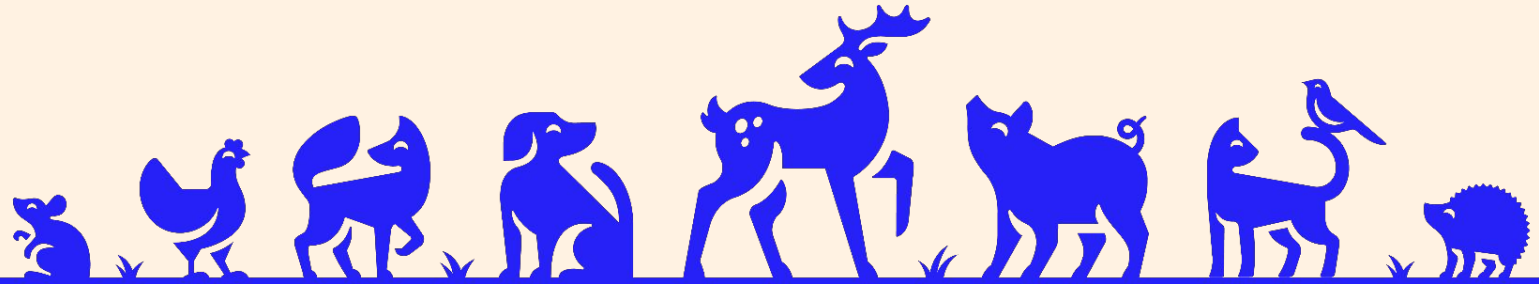
Thank you



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