

## Why it's important to work with your local wildlife rehabilitators

There are a number of reasons why it's very important to build a good working relationship between your vet practice and your local wildlife rehabilitation centre(s).

Firstly, it's important for you to have a good knowledge of your local centres, their facilities and their methods of practice. This will ensure you can feel happy to send wildlife casualties to these sites after you have treated them in the knowledge that their welfare needs will be met and these animals will end up being released with a competitive chance of survival. Many wildlife centres also need veterinary medicines for ongoing treatment and care of animals, and if you are supplying these drugs then you have a duty of care to ensure and demonstrate that these animals are under your care when you are prescribing medications. This involves a knowledge of the site and adequate due diligence to be performed to allow you as a veterinary surgeon to legally prescribe.

Veterinary nurses can be key advocates for wild animal welfare and care, and can be especially good liaisons between practices and wildlife rehabilitators. RVNs may also have more time to leave the practice to visit sites and be involved in two-way education. Veterinary staff have much to offer the rehabilitation sector, including guiding decisions on euthanasia, performing procedures and prescribing medications, tuition around administration of medications or minor medical procedures and educating on wildlife welfare. Similarly, experienced rehabilitators can also teach the veterinary sector a great deal, including best practice for handling, husbandry, enrichment and nutrition and contributing to conversations around suitability for release.

There is a huge deal of variation across rehabbers, and neither these sites nor their personnel are currently regulated. Variation can range from back-yard or garage set-up caring for a very few animals per year with basic equipment and no funds, to large sites with veterinary hospitals rehabilitating a range of species with large teams, a wide range of facilities and consistent funding.

While the vast majority of wildlife rehabilitators are involved with wildlife because they care and want the best outcome for these animals, there is a huge range of experience and access to training on areas such as wildlife welfare, releasability, ethics, recognition of pain and so forth. Because of this diversity and the lack of regulation, coupled with a wide diversity of knowledge, there is a real risk that wildlife welfare may be compromised in some settings. Indeed, RSPCA has had to prosecute rehabilitators due to severe animal welfare compromises. There is an urgent need for regulation, and this is something that RSPCA and other groups continue to lobby for. The medium- to long-term plan while awaiting any legislation is to construct an incentive-based system whereby rehabbers will have access to education, CPD and funding to ensure they are operating to best practice. But until that time, it is our responsibility as the veterinary professions to help safeguard the welfare of these animals.

It is essential that veterinary teams educate themselves on best practice care of wildlife, and the aim of this website is to help achieve this goal. Vets should be familiar with doses and treatments in common species, and also of common toxicities and variations in dose range between wild species and domestics. Furthermore, vet teams understand which types of conditions and injuries and species are able to cope with the rehabilitation process and ultimately are good candidates for release. Working with your local rehabbers will help ensure you are ensuring high welfare standards across the animal's journey towards rehabilitation and release. This will also help improve staff morale and retention and help reduce moral stress and injury in staff.

The RSPCA and our partners do not support long-term captivity of wild animals. Studies have shown that animals moved from highly enriched environments to more barren environments may suffer more

than if they had never experienced the highly enriched environments. Furthermore, fear and distress, as well as pain including chronic pain, remain extremely hard to adequately assess in these species.

Wild animals have complex welfare needs and have not been bred for a captive environment. Therefore, where a wild animal is not able to be released within a reasonable time-frame of rehabilitation, the best welfare option is euthanasia. Furthermore, where an animal would need to undergo a life-altering procedure (e.g. leg or wing amputation, enucleation), or has a disease which cannot be cured, these conditions would give these animals a disadvantage for survival in the wild, so again the most welfare-friendly option is euthanasia. Many rehabbers do not share this view or understanding of euthanasia as a tool for positive welfare outcomes, and it is our shared responsibility to help educate them so we can all be working together for best animal welfare. It's also up to our professions to help educate the public around wildlife welfare and RSPCA is also working on this. Where vet teams have concerns about wildlife welfare these should be reported to the RSPCA.