

When Birds Can't Fly - Or Squirrels Can't Climb

An article written for *Skipping Stones*, a multi-cultural children's magazine on wildlife rehabilitation - what it is, how anyone can help.

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Have you every found a baby bird that was out of its nest? or an injured rabbit that your cat or dog caught? Have you ever seen a bird hit your window? Or found a squirrel that was hit by a car? Did you ever get mad at the older boy up the street who was shooting at birds with his BB gun?

Wild animals can get hurt just the same as you or I do, or just like your pet bird or cat or snake can. Only, most of the time, it's worse for wild animals because not very many people know how to take care of them and - since they don't belong to anybody but themselves, there's usually no one to pay a veterinarian to take care of them. That's what 'wildlife rehabilitators' do: we take care of hurt or orphaned wild animals. We need a lot of special training and, in the United States, we have to be specially licensed by each state and the federal government in order to do this.

What Does A Wildlife Rehabilitator Do?

A wildlife rehabilitator is like a paramedic, a laboratory technician, a nurse, a dietician, and a physical therapist all rolled into one. We are like the ambulance team that first sees accident victims and treats them for shock, immobilizes fractures so they don't get any worse before the doctor can see them, takes blood and analyzes it, looks for parasites and treats them, gives shots or other medications, cleans wounds and bandages them, determines the appropriate diet for each animal, and makes sure they are in top physical condition before they are released, through appropriate exercise and training. We work very closely with veterinarians, who take the x-rays and perform any necessary surgery, but there are so many wild animals that get hurt every year that veterinarians who normally take care of your pets or farm animals simply do not have the time to give wildlife the same kind of care. The veterinarians do the kinds of treatments that only they know how to do, and rehabilitators do everything else.

How Do Wild Animals Get Hurt?

I have already mentioned some of the ways wild animals get hurt. Besides hitting windows or being hit by cars, being shot or caught by cats or dogs (which are not WILD predators - they do not usually need to catch other animals in order to survive), they get tangled in fences, or fishing line, or caught in traps; they get poisoned, either accidentally or on purpose; birds hit power lines; birds or mammals fall down chimneys; their nests get disturbed when someone cuts a tree down or trims a hedge, decides to fix up an old barn, mow a field, or move an old piece of machinery. Whenever we as humans decide to build a new house or parking lot, the homes of hundreds of animals get destroyed; those that can, move; but when they move, they

have to cross into other animals' territories, or they face new and unfamiliar dangers, and so are more likely to get hurt.

It is very rare to receive an animal injured by a natural predator, because once it's injured, it usually has less of a chance to get away the second time. Predators naturally look for the sick, injured, young, or old - they are easier to catch.

Therefore, almost all the animals coming into rehabilitators (and it is probably A MILLION AND A HALF ANIMALS EACH YEAR just in the United States alone) have been hurt in some way by humans - either accidentally, simply because of the way we live our lives, or on purpose.

How Can You Tell An Animal Needs Help?

Whenever you get the opportunity, watch the animals around you and you will see NORMAL behavior. With most wild animals, normal behavior means they will not let you very close to them: they will run away, climb a tree, fly away, or hide somewhere safe, like in an underground burrow. If an animal does not run or fly away, or tries to run or fly away but cannot, something is probably wrong. Sometimes babies have not learned that we humans are their most dangerous enemy; just because they do not run away, however, does NOT mean that they are abandoned by their parents. Most likely, their parents are nearby and are still taking care of them but, like all young animals (even humans!) the babies decided to explore or got curious or just got tired of being in the nest or they were playing a bit roughly and one fell out.

What Should You Do If You Find An Animal You Think Is Hurt?

Observe the animal from a distance first. If there is obviously something wrong with a leg or a wing, get help fast. DO NOT TRY TO PICK UP AN ANIMAL WITHOUT HELP. Even baby squirrels have teeth that can hurt you, and they might, especially if they are in pain or scared; baby hawks and owls have talons on their feet that can do a lot of damage; baby herons can poke you in the eye. If there is no help close by, try to get a cardboard box upside down over the animal so it cannot run away, is safe from predators, and so that, in the dark, it will calm down and not be so scared. Call a wildlife rehabilitator. We are trained to handle wild animals. We know that they are going to be hurt and scared and therefore will try to defend themselves. It does not help the animal if one of us gets hurt, so we are very careful and have the right kind of equipment to catch them without hurting them or us. Remember that you are helping them just by calling.

What Can You Do To Help Keep Animals Safe?

You can find out if there is a wildlife rehabilitator or rehabilitation center in your area. Invite them to come speak to your school and teach more people how to live carefully, so fewer animals get hurt. And so you will know where to take animals that DO get hurt. You might also think about doing a fund-raising project for them: collecting money or food for the animals they

take care of. You can find out what veterinarians help wild animals and let those veterinarians know how much you appreciate the work that they do.

WINDOWS: If your house or your school has a window that birds hit a lot, you can hang streamers outside that will move in the wind or you can tape a silhouette of a falcon or owl to the window to keep the birds away. If there is a bird feeder outside the window, move it further away so if the birds who are eating get scared, they are less likely to fly into the window. Remember, glass can act like a mirror and reflect the trees, so the birds might think they are flying towards the trees instead of away from them; or if they can see through a room and out the other side, keep the curtains closed on one window. Birds don't understand glass: if they can see through it, they think they can fly through it.

WIRE FENCES: Thin wire is hard to see, especially in dim light or at night, and barbed wire is very, very dangerous. Tying strips of cloth to the top strand of wire will help make it visible, as the cloth will move in the breeze and let birds know the wire is there.

FISHING LINE, KITE OR BALLOON STRING: Never, never leave fishing line or string lying wrapped around bushes or on the ground, and if you find some that other people have left, pick it up and dispose of it carefully.

CATS: The safest place for cats is inside the house. They catch millions of small rodents and birds each year - and it is not fair to give wild animals another predator that is not subject to the same survival of the fittest rules as they are. Remember, pet cats do not need to hunt for food and the presence or absence of prey animals has no effect on the cat population. They are simply hunting out of the same instinct that makes them play with moving bits of string or other toys. Keep them inside or, if they have to be out, be sure they wear a bell and that you're not unfairly attracting birds (like with a bird feeder or fruit trees) for them to hunt.

POWER LINES: Many large birds such as hawks and eagles get electrocuted each year when they land on power poles. These birds like to use the poles as a high place from which to hunt, but their wings are so long that they often touch two wires as they take off or land. You can write your power company and ask them to put adapters on the power poles to protect these birds. The adapters are perches which stand up higher than the pole and the power lines. Since birds like to be high, they usually choose to land on the highest point and can stay safe.

GUNS: Almost all birds, and many mammals, are protected by law. It is against the law to shoot them, have them for pets, disturb their nests, or have their feathers, eggs, nests, or skins without special permits. Some animals, called game birds or game animals (such as some ducks, pheasants, or deer), have hunting seasons, when it is legal to hunt them if you have a permit and follow certain restrictions. It is important to realize that all animals feel pain just like we do, they get scared, bleed, suffer broken bones, and, if injured, would be unable to take care of their babies, who would starve. If you see anyone, even a friend, shooting at animals, it is important to report it to an adult.

WHAT ABOUT BABIES? Baby wild animals, especially birds, do fall out of the nest. The best thing you can do is return them to the nest. It is NOT true that the parents will abandon them if they have been touched by humans: except for turkey vultures, birds have no sense of smell; and though mammals have a very powerful sense of smell, the parenting instinct is so strong that simply the smell of humans will not scare the parents away. However, constant disturbance around the nest WILL often scare them away, which would let the babies get cold or hungry and might cause them to die. So, if you know where a nest is, it is very important to be respectful and let the parents raise their babies in safety and peace.

If you find a baby out of the nest and are not sure where the nest is, call a wildlife rehabilitator. Baby birds are very hard to raise. They are growing very fast and so need feeding as often as every 15 minutes. Their diet has to be very carefully adjusted to be sure they have all the nutrients they need to grow healthy bones and strong feathers. Baby mammals need special formulas that are matched as closely as possible to the composition of their mothers' milk - the wrong kind of milk can make them very sick. And both birds and mammals MUST be raised around others of their own kind or they may never be able to survive in the wild. Remember, it is against the law to keep most wild animals as pets and to release a wild animal that is tame is a sure death sentence for the animal.

Why Is All This Important?

This world does not belong to us. Because humans have such an enormous power to manipulate, use, or destroy the rest of the world, we sometimes think that it is all ours - but the world belongs just as much to the plants and animals as it does to us. The continued existence of the natural world - all the plants, insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals - is important, both because they have as much right to live as we do and also because their continued existence is critical to ours. Right now, there are eleven species of plants and animals driven to extinction EVERY DAY. And they are leaving big holes in the natural order of the world. As recently as 1970, there was only one extinction per year. Taking care of injured animals - most of whom have been injured or orphaned by us or the way we live - is one way that we can help.

The baby bird that you return to its nest or the injured squirrel that gets help because you called the right people may not make the difference between existence and extinction for its species - but it makes a difference to that animal. And YOU get to know that, just by caring, you have made a difference in the world.