

## Wildlife Rehabilitation

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While inspired by nature, when I started photographing, I could only identify the most common local birds and mammals. Staying in one place for hours, scanning for potential photos, revealed wondrous moments that would have escaped me otherwise. Years into the pursuit, research and observation has improved my knowledge, but a pivotal experience for me was working with a wildlife rehabber.



We met by chance and I was invited to come and photograph some of the patients. I was not prepared for the incredible experience of working with wildlife hands-on. While I had not been overly enthused with the idea of photographing a Canada Goose gosling, when I actually saw its fuzz and it trailed along after me like a buddy, I changed my mind. The idea of baby raccoons had been appealing but I was unprepared for the effect they had on me. In fact, during my first visit I hardly photographed at all – instead I simply absorbed the experience and just enjoyed being there. As a photographer, my experience with wildlife had been from afar, whatever the subject would tolerate. Working with a rehabber broke that barrier.

### WILDLIFE REHABILITATION

There is an entire network of wildlife rehabilitators with the goal of rehabilitating sick, injured, or orphaned wildlife so they can be returned to the wild. Depending on laws and species, becoming a rehabber requires training and requires state and/or federal permits. Some may have permits for birds, or mammals, or both. For certain wildlife, special permits are necessary (e.g., rabies vector species/deer).

I was very lucky to work with a fantastic rehabber, Kathy Woods, at The Phoenix Wildlife Center in Phoenix, Maryland. For over twenty years she has worked with wildlife and her experience shows in her common sense judgment, which I have come to respect immensely. She has a permit to work with birds and mammals, and now holds a special permit to work with Bald Eagles in the state of Maryland.

A typical day in the life of a wildlife rehabber depends on the patients. Over half of the animals that come in have either been hit by a car or have encountered a cat. During spring and summer there are often orphaned or injured baby birds and mammals, both of which require a great deal of focused care. The day can start at six in the morning, with most baby birds requiring feeding every half-hour for about twelve hours. Young mammals may need to be fed every two to three hours.

Cages need to be cleaned, adequate food and medical supplies need to be on hand, calls need to be answered and emergencies with new patients addressed, and care plans created. It is intensive and demanding work, with no room for holidays or time off. A baby bird may have a three- to four-week stay costing roughly twenty-five dollars in supplies, whereas an injured owl can cost hundreds of dollars to care for and will remain for months. An injury is treated, sometimes with surgery; then a bird needs flight time in adequate space for reconditioning before it is set free again in the wild.

### HAVE A WILDLIFE EMERGENCY?

If you spot a wildlife emergency a rehabber can be located either through local animal shelters, veterinarians, or even internet resources. But before making that call, consider the following:

### **Abandoned or not?**

A baby bird that appears to be abandoned probably isn't. Often the parent is lurking nearby out of view, waiting for you to go away. If the baby bird is not in immediate danger, such as being on the ground with a cat on the prowl, leave the area and observe from a distance out of view to see if the parents return. Keeping in mind that most baby birds need to be fed every thirty minutes, it should not take very long for the parent to return. If it does not, contact a rehabber for instructions on how to provide immediate care and then get it to the rehabber.

If the bird is in an area of imminent danger, such as exposed to a predator or in a roadway, it may need to be moved to a safe location. Be aware of what is considered a dangerous bird in your area. Great-horned Owls, for instance, have up to 300 pounds per square inch of squeezing power in their talons and should not be handled by anyone without experience. For songbirds, forget the myth that a parent will no longer attend to a baby that has been touched by a human; it is untrue. Take your hand and place it over the back of the bird, like grabbing a potato, and get the bird to safety. It may take a few tries.

Note that slightly older owls can climb back up trees to their nesting area unless the tree has smooth bark, so you may just need to hold off the neighbor's cat long enough for the bird to climb up to safety. If the owl is fuzzy with down, it may be too young and need assistance.

Be aware of the natural history of the animal. Rabbits and deer leave their young in hiding all day while they are off foraging. Even if the young wanders a bit, the parent should still be able to find it when returning.

### **Window strike**

A common occurrence is for a bird to strike a window and become stunned. Try to get the bird into a paper bag or box with a little bit of room. Keep it warm and dry in a dark, quiet area for one to two hours to allow it to recover. Do not disturb it during this period, which includes no peeking! When you take it outside, the bird should be able to fly off, recovered. If the bird has become injured from the impact, contact a rehabber right away.

### **Immediate care**

A situation may arise where you have to provide immediate care to an injured or abandoned bird. Contacting a rehabber to get instructions right away is optimal, but not always possible. Keep in mind that wildlife mammals should not be handled and some wild birds should not be, either. If you take in a baby songbird, consider the following:

- The bird needs to be fed – frequently. This is not a domestic pet that can be left all day long with a bowl of dried food while you're at work. It needs to be fed about every half-hour due to a fast metabolism. Wrens are even higher maintenance, requiring food every twenty minutes for fourteen hours! Don't feed it people food; try some internet resources to see what is in the bird's diet. Often wet cat food and some fruits, like grapes or blueberries, are a possibility. Note that live insects, like mealworms, should be killed before feeding them to young birds, otherwise they can burrow through their stomach linings. (Watch an adult bluebird with a worm before it feeds it to its young – they shake it around to kill it first.) When it becomes dark out, the feeding can stop – simulating nature and when the parent would end its foraging activities and stay at the nest to keep the young warm.
- An often-overlooked fact is that the bird needs to be kept warm. A heating pad on low can help. Extreme caution with electrical connections should be exercised when using a heating pad. Make sure the outlet is adequate for the appliance.

### **Unwanted wildlife**

Sometimes wildlife sets up a bit too close to home, like squirrels in the attic. Trapping and releasing an animal further away can break up the family unit and possibly sentence young to certain death, as they cannot fend for themselves. You can contact a rehabber about humane ways to encourage them to move. Often, mammals will have an alternate den site; all you need to do is convince them the current site is no longer safe or suitable. Sometimes playing a radio nearby will do it, but again, a rehabber can be a great resource for this sort of thing.

As a nature photographer, consider getting to know your local wildlife rehabilitator. If nothing else, you will have a resource in the event you have a wildlife emergency. For me, it became much more than that; working with Kathy and the wildlife in her care was an experience of a lifetime.



*Someone picked up this baby Cedar Waxwing thinking it was abandoned, when in fact it was not and was actually taken away from its parents. Kathy is feeding it a grape with tweezers. The bird was successfully released weeks later in excellent health.*

### THE PHOENIX WILDLIFE CENTER

Kathy Woods is a wildlife rehabber in Phoenix, Maryland. She has dedicated countless hours to her wildlife patients over the last twenty years and recently acquired a license to work with Bald Eagles in the state of Maryland. With hundreds of nesting pairs in the state, sometimes eagles become injured or fall from the nest while “branching” – young birds practicing flight while holding onto a branch. They require special care and adequate space, specifically a flight cage that’s 100’ long, 20’ wide and 16’ high so they can fly strongly when released. The Phoenix Center is raising funds now to build a flight cage for eagles. To find out more about Kathy and her endeavors, please visit her website at [www.phoenixwildlifecenter.org](http://www.phoenixwildlifecenter.org).



Heather Forcier photographs nature subjects throughout North America. Her work has been published for various commercial uses and is sold in prints at several permanent displays. She is editor in chief at NatureScapes.Net and as one of the site operators she also manages membership and the online store. To see more of Heather’s work, please visit her website at [www.heatherforcier.com](http://www.heatherforcier.com).

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