

Wildlife in Need of Health Care: What Veterinarians Need to Know and COVID-19 Considerations

By Dr. Lindsey Long, Wildlife Veterinarian and Amanda Kamps, Wildlife Rehabilitation Program Manager, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Practicing veterinarians are frequently approached by citizens looking for assistance with sick, injured and/or orphaned wildlife. Some Wisconsin veterinarians are consulting veterinarians with licensed wildlife rehabilitators in their communities, and they help provide diagnostic and therapeutic care for wild animals. Many more of the state's veterinarians are occasionally contacted about wildlife in need and, therefore, could benefit from an update on the regulations pertaining to the treatment and rehabilitation of wildlife in Wisconsin.

COVID-19 Considerations

On March 24, Gov. Tony Evers directed the state Department of Health Services (DHS) to issue the Safer at Home Order to slow the spread of COVID-19 throughout Wisconsin. Under the Order, wildlife rehabilitation, including the transport of a wild animal to receive rehabilitative care, is considered an essential service as provided by licensed wildlife rehabilitators. However, in order to protect public health and safety during this time, there may be limitations in the capacity at each rehabilitation center/location and their ability to transport a wild animal to a rehabilitation center/location. Many wildlife rehabilitators may need to temporarily modify how they are able to assist injured, orphaned or ill wildlife during this time, in order to still protect their own health and safety. They may also have reduced personal protective equipment (PPE) available. As such, veterinary clinics may receive additional calls from the public at this time if there is a reduction in a rehabilitator's capacity. Please remember that this emergency does not change the requirements that are in place for rehabilitation, and all statutes and rules for wildlife rehabilitation and the practice of veterinary medicine still apply.

If you traditionally refer all wild animal calls to specific wildlife rehabilitators, it is recommended to be in frequent contact with them this spring/summer so you know what their capability is to provide care to wildlife. This may change frequently, and you may need to adjust how your wild animal calls are handled.

If you or your staff have the time or interest in assisting more with wild animal calls, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has information on their website that describes how certain wildlife species care for their young, and what to look for to determine if an animal is truly orphaned (<https://dnr.wi.gov>, key words "keep wildlife wild" or "orphan"). Most of the wild animal contacts received this time of year are when a well-intentioned person assumes a young wild animal found alone is orphaned. By assessing the situation with the caller, you can help reunite young wild animals with the parents and keep unnecessary admits out of wildlife rehabilitation centers. This is not only the best thing for the wild animal, but it will help the licensed wildlife rehabilitators, this year especially, because of their current limitations.

Wildlife Rehabilitation Is Licensed Activity in Wisconsin

As a result of the knowledge and experience required to responsibly rehabilitate wildlife, the DNR has a wildlife rehabilitation licensing program that permits temporary care and treatment of injured, diseased and/or orphaned wild animals with the goal of releasing them back into their natural habitats. Wildlife rehabilitation regulations can be found in state statute chapter Wis. 169, and in s. NR 19.

Depending on the species being rehabilitated, specific requirements as well as additional permits may be required. For instance, wildlife rehabilitators working with birds protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act must possess a Migratory Bird Rehabilitation Permit issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the rehabilitation of endangered and threatened species requires special authorization from the DNR.

Veterinarians Play Key Role in Wildlife Rehabilitation in Wisconsin

A Wisconsin veterinary license does not authorize the rehabilitation of wildlife. However, veterinarians may provide emergency care for wild animals, provided they are not in possession of the animal for more than 24 hours. This special exemption allows veterinarians to help concerned citizens by providing initial evaluation, initial emergency care and stabilization of wildlife, before the animal is transferred to a wildlife rehabilitator. Veterinarians may also euthanize any wild animal where, based on their expert judgment, it is in the best interest for the welfare of the animal, when the animal is suffering from an untreatable injury or disease, or when the animal poses a significant health or safety risk.

Some veterinarians may feel unprepared to provide emergency care for wildlife species. In many situations, contacts from citizens about injured or orphaned wildlife are best handled by referring the citizen directly to licensed wildlife rehabilitators in the area. A directory of Wisconsin licensed wildlife rehabilitators is available on the DNR's Wildlife Rehabilitation web page (<https://dnr.wi.gov>, key word "rehab"). In addition, the DNR has a Keep Wildlife Wild web page (<https://dnr.wi.gov>, key words "keep wildlife wild" or "orphan") that describes how certain wildlife species care for their young, and what to look for to determine if an animal is truly orphaned.

Beyond providing emergency care for wild animals in need, veterinarians have the opportunity to assist with good disease and conservation management for the state's wildlife. If presented with a species that may be endangered or threatened or with a wild animal whose injuries may have resulted from illegal activity, veterinarians should contact the DNR's wildlife rehabilitation program manager for guidance.

The same requirement for reporting certain animal diseases to the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) that applies to domestic animals, also applies when a veterinarian recognizes these diseases in a wild animal. For more information on reportable diseases, visit Wisconsin's DATCP Reportable Diseases page at https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Programs_Services/DiseaseReportingRequirements.aspx

Species-Specific Regulations

As mentioned above, the identification or risk of certain animal diseases can preclude species from being rehabilitated. In Wisconsin, skunks cannot be rehabilitated and if a person brings a wild skunk into a veterinary clinic, it is required for the veterinarian to notify the Department. The rehabilitation of white-tailed deer is regulated to maintain separation between chronic wasting disease (CWD)- affected and non-CWD counties. For more information on the deer rehabilitation policy and a map indicating which counties are considered CWD-affected or non-CWD, please visit our website <https://dnr.wi.gov>, search “deer rehabilitation.”

Extra-Label Drug Use

Many species of animals rehabilitated in Wisconsin are game species and have hunting or trapping seasons. As harvest seasons can result in the consumption of meat from these species, please remember to keep the Animal Medicinal Drug Use Clarification Act (AMDUCA) in mind. Harvest season structure for many species, ranging from squirrels, deer and bear, should be considered as well as consumption withdrawal times and the ability to mark an individual animal, before prescribing any medication.

Wildlife as Pets

In addition to the wildlife rehabilitation regulations, Wisconsin also has regulations regarding keeping wildlife in captivity. Many wildlife species cannot be taken from the wild and most species require licenses from the DNR in order to be kept in captivity. Requesting to see this license before offering to examine or medically treat all wildlife will help ensure these animals are possessed legally. Licensing policies are found in state statute chapters Wis. 169, Wis. 29, and in s. NR 16. Should an issue arise, illegally held wildlife can be reported via our anonymous hotline: 1-800-TIP-WDNR (847-9367).

Veterinarians as Consulting Veterinarians for Rehabilitators or Licensed Wildlife Rehabilitators

Recognizing that veterinary care is essential to the successful rehabilitation of wild animals, the DNR requires that all licensed wildlife rehabilitators work with a consulting veterinarian who is willing to provide diagnostic and therapeutic support for wildlife being rehabilitated. The choice to be a consulting veterinarian for a wildlife rehabilitator involves serious consideration of whether the clinic has staff with sufficient experience and the desire to work with wildlife, whether adequate facilities and equipment are available, and whether disease risk management between domestic and wildlife patients is possible.

Veterinarians who retain animals longer than 24 hours must have a wildlife rehabilitation license, be officially identified as a consulting veterinarian working with a licensed wildlife rehabilitator or have notified the DNR. Veterinarians with a strong interest in wildlife rehabilitation are welcome to become licensed rehabilitators under the DNR program, which involves passing a basic examination, submitting an application and facility protocols, and passing a rehabilitation facility inspection. More commonly, veterinary clinics serve as a consulting veterinarian with a wildlife rehabilitator in their area and work

cooperatively with them on the care of injured and sick wildlife. The DNR and licensed wildlife rehabilitators are very grateful to those veterinary clinics that provide expertise, and in many cases donate resources, to ensure that wildlife receives quality care.

If you have any questions or would like an electronic copy of the wildlife rehabilitation directory, please contact Amanda Kamps, DNR wildlife rehabilitation program manager at (608) 712-5280. For other questions, you may also contact Dr. Lindsey Long, DNR wildlife veterinarian at (608) 219-5038.