

Helping Injured/Orphaned Wildlife

A Wisconsin Society for Ornithology Publicity Committee Fact Sheet
Ursula Petersen, WSO Publicity Committee Chair
Scott Diehl, Wisconsin Humane Society, Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Milwaukee

Wild animals may become injured or orphaned, often due to human activities. Once debilitated and unprotected, injured birds or other animals are usually doomed to predation or starvation and death. Though some may consider this to be Nature's scheme, in our age of human-caused wildlife mortalities from vehicle collisions, habitat destruction, window collisions, and so on, others may wish to intervene to prevent additional deaths and to help release healthy individuals back to the wild. Many people may simply feel compelled to offer humane aid to a suffering animal.

For the animals' sake, federal and state laws prohibit possession of protected species. However, in the case of injured or orphaned wildlife, these laws allow for citizens to possess these creatures long enough to get them to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator (up to 24 hours). Knowledge and experience in wildlife handling and rehabilitation are **essential** to bring a wild individual back to health and successful independence. For your own safety and the sake of the animals, **DO NOT** attempt to care for these animals yourself, other than to bring them to experienced help. Follow the steps below to obtain trained, licensed help quickly.

Step One – Call for advice

Generally, the most important action to take for injured or seemingly orphaned wildlife is to call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator to ask for his or her advice. The rehabilitator can help decide whether or not the animal truly needs help, and if so, how you may safely contain it and transport it to help. However, if an animal is in immediate danger, such as on a roadway, the first step will be to **SAFELY** get it out of harm's way (see **Step Two**).

Calling for advice is especially important in the case of creatures that you think might be orphaned. Animals that seem to be orphaned often are still under their parents' care, though the parents may not be immediately nearby. Watch from cover (e.g., from inside a house) to see if the animal's parents come back to care for it. However, unfurred mammals or downy or unfeathered birds should not be out of their nest and are likely to require help.

If you are unsure how to reach your local licensed wildlife rehabilitators, call the local humane society, police, DNR, nature center, veterinarian, or the U.S. (Dept of Interior) Fish and Wildlife Service; they should be able to refer you to local resources.

Monday – Friday, 7:45 am – 4:30 pm, you may call the Wisconsin DNR and ask for the name and phone number of a licensed rehabilitator near you. The DNR has a "Directory of Wisconsin Permitted Wildlife Rehabilitators."

Step Two – Safely contain the animal

If you choose to intervene, protect your own safety while containing the animal! If possible, avoid directly handling the animal. Instead, gently scoop it into a cardboard box or other container. If you are bitten by a carnivore such as a fox or raccoon, or by a bat, the animal may have to be destroyed to be tested for rabies to protect your own health, so be careful! Watch out for the long, sharp bills of herons and the talons of birds of prey. Even a few smaller birds like Northern Cardinals can bite very hard, though their bite is unlikely to break the skin. Get the animal to trained help **QUICKLY AND WITHOUT ADDITIONAL STRESS TO THE ANIMAL**.

For most birds and for many small mammals, a closed-top box high enough to allow the injured individual to stand without bumping its head can be made into a holding box. **BEFORE THE INDIVIDUAL IS PLACED IN THE BOX**, punch several air holes with a pencil or pen in the sides of the box, and line the box floor with paper toweling or other secure footing material that will stay in place during transport. Gently scoop or place the animal into the box, and close the top. Do not use cloth that has loose strings or loops, since these can wrap around the animal and cause strangulation. Place the box with the animal in a **quiet** room while waiting for transport. Choose a cool spot in hot weather, a warm place in cold, and never place the wild animal near a stove, fire, heater or air conditioner, or in the sun, etc., unless directed to do so by a wildlife rehabilitator. Small birds can be gently placed in a brown paper bag with soft, secure footing such as a folded kitchen towel or paper toweling, with the bag top folded over and held closed with a clothespin. **IN ALL CASES, DO NOT GIVE FOOD OR WATER, AND GET THE ANIMAL TO HELP IMMEDIATELY.**

If the animal is larger or potentially dangerous, **DO NOT** handle it. Have someone stand by to watch the animal so no additional harm occurs while you call a rehabilitator or other local help.

Step Three – Transport the animal

Drive the contained animal as soon as possible to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Minimize stress for the animal by avoiding excessive handling; loud noise (e.g., car radio) and talking near the animal; and excessive disturbance, such as looking in on the contained animal needlessly or showing it around to other people.

Resources

Locating a wildlife rehabilitator

- A list of Wisconsin wildlife rehabilitators is on the WSO website under Bird/Nature Organizations <http://www.uwgb.edu/birds/wso/wisc-org.htm#rehabcenters>.
- Also try this website for help with finding a local rehabilitator and a contact number: <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~devo0028/contact.htm>.
- Baby Bird Assistance: Bird Rescue Research Center International Wildlife Rehabilitation – <http://www.ornithology.com/rehab.html>.
- National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association: Visit <http://www.nwrawildlife.org/default.asp>. Use the menu on the left to search for information on wildlife rehabilitation and for wildlife rehabilitators.

Legal aspects of wildlife possession and wildlife rehabilitation

- <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/whealth/rehab/index.htm>.
- <http://permits.fws.gov/instructions/ObtainPermit.shtml>.