**IS WILDLIFE REHABILITATION MENTORING FOR YOU?**

**HOW DOES IT BEGIN?**

It is not unusual for seasoned wildlife rehabilitators to be approached by people who are thrilled to find someone helping wildlife and express interest in joining their ranks.  New and very busy rehabilitators may be delighted with the possibility of an influx of more help. However, many of these potential applicants really do not understand wildlife rehabilitation. The person who thinks they want to become a rehabilitator needs to gain a clear and realistic understanding of wildlife rehabilitation. The potential rehabilitator needs to understand that rehabilitation involves labor intensive physical work for a difficult, unpaid, volunteer activity and takes considerable time, energy, and mental focus every day.

Your first responsibility as a potential mentor is to explain that wildlife rehabilitation is not always pretty, fun, or cuddly, and should not be considered a hobby.  During your conversation, consider including some of the down and dirty, nitty-gritting aspects of wildlife rehabilitation such as: unpleasant sights, adverse smells, viewing and treating injuries, parasites, and diseases, making the hard euthanasia decisions, cleaning cages and the burden of handling emotional stress.

There are requirements of wildlife rehabilitators that most people are unaware of that need to be explained. Wildlife rehabilitation is complex and demanding work that isn’t for everybody and it’s best to find out if it’s for them before the apprentice and mentor are too far into the process. Let them know that (1) they must provide a physical area or facility separated from humans and domestic animals, (2) they will need to finance cages, supplies, food medication and veterinary bills, (3) they will be required to learn and maintain a wide range of skills, (4) they must achieve and maintain the state required wildlife rehabilitation licenses, and (5) they must prioritize wildlife needs before other responsibilities, wants and desires.

**EXAMINE YOUR OWN PROFICIENCIES BEFORE EXAMINING THEIRS**

Wildlife rehabilitation requires specialized knowledge and skills to rehabilitate and release wildlife back to its native habitat successfully. Rehabilitators who are considering taking on apprentices should ensure they are proficient in the following task related areas before requiring the same proficiency from an apprentice.

Below is a sampling of the types of skills a mentor will be teaching, monitoring, and evaluating. The mentor should develop a form that includes this list. After taking on an apprentice, the mentor and apprentice should review the following, and during follow-on training, request the apprentice sign and date as each task is taught, monitored, and evaluated, which will indicate completion.

* “A Wildlife Rehabilitator’s Code of Ethics” developed by NWRA/IWRC
* State and federal regulations affecting wildlife rehabilitation
* Basic identification of common native wildlife species
* Natural history and behavior of common native species
* Methods to prevent problems with wildlife and humane solutions
* Diet and nutrition of wildlife species applicant wants to rehab
* Ability to capture and handle safely the species applicant wants to rehab
* Identification & general assessment of basic health problems (not diagnostics)
* Basic first aid and problem-solving for species
* Wildlife parasites and disease, including zoonoses
* Life skills for wildlife euthanasia, necropsy, and disposal
* Release criteria, considerations, preparation
* Public contact (handling phone calls, getting information, etc.)
* Recordkeeping
* Facilities/caging/habitat needs for wildlife species
* Basic resources and references

**CRITERIA FOR APPRENTICESHIP MUST BE MET**

As a mentor, you must indulge in a screening process that might take a while, but it must be met to help you save time, reduce frustrations, and risk, and ensure future rehabilitators provide effective wildlife care. Provide the potential apprentice a written description of “what it takes” to be a wildlife rehabilitator. Include the task list from the above section and requirements, 1 through 5, from the “How Does it Begin” segment. You can also add your own personal requirements to this written description. The write-up will help ensure that key points are not forgotten as you are trying to get wildlife rehab work done at the same time you are screening your apprentice candidate. A written description also reduces time with people who are not serious. You are giving the applicant the opportunity to make an educated and informed decision to pursue or not to pursue the field of wildlife rehabilitation. During the screening process, you, as their potential mentor, should be observing and evaluating the potential apprentice’s personality and emotional stability which are factors that affect a person’s ability to effectively rehabilitate wildlife.

**ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR WRITTEN DESCRIPTION & INFORMATION GATHERING**

Gather pertinent information and insights with a written application form, structured interview, or unstructured conversation. Although seemingly formal for the home-based rehabilitator, this information is critical in deciding if an applicant may become a rehabilitator or if the mentor should accept the person for training. It also helps the applicant understand that the mentor takes the apprentice/mentor relationship seriously. Through observation and active listening, a mentor needs to evaluate whether their own interpersonal style will be compatible with that of the potential apprentice. If the answer is no, the candidate will benefit from a referral.

**EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK:**

* + - Why do you want to be a rehabilitator?
    - When are you available (time and days, during busy season)?
    - Do you have adequate physical space to rehabilitate wildlife (separate space away from humans and domestic or exotic animals)?
    - Do you have funds available to cover rehabilitation costs?
    - Do you have a vet willing to work with them and wildlife?
    - Are you willing to perform the range and variety of tasks required?
    - Do you consider yourself to be self-motivated?
    - What values, interests, and experiences do you have that are compatible with wildlife rehabilitation?

**OBSERVATIONS, DOES THE APPLICANT:**

* + - Show initiative and dedication to learning?
    - Demonstrate attention to detail?
    - Communicate well with you and others?
    - Respond appropriately to conflict or emotional stress?
    - Show an ability to make good decisions using sound and appropriate judgment?
    - Display trustworthiness?
    - Engage in effective problem-solving and decision-making skills.

It’s also helpful to request and check references.  Determine the type of rehabilitation the applicant wants to learn, (If they want to learn bears and the mentor rehabilitates opossums, it does not fit.)  If they insist on learning about raptor rehabilitation and the mentor works with songbirds, it may not work, and the applicant may need to be referred to a rehabilitator working with those species.

Make sure the potential apprentice takes an honest and real look at wildlife rehabilitation by explaining the good, the bad, the ugly and the unpleasant. There are always successes, positives, and rewards in our field, but tasks and activities involved in rehab are not always fun and sometimes heart wrenching.

During this valuable screening process, make sure you have clarified your expectations before moving forward. Provide a list of knowledge and skills the applicant will be required to learn and perform while under your mentorship. Whether brief or comprehensive, this list will serve as a critical communication tool and will also reinforce the proficiencies a wildlife rehabilitator should have.

After a positive determination is made regarding the individual moving forward as your accepted apprentice, this is a good time to introduce the documented expectations between mentor and apprentice with a “Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU).

If the established criteria are unmet or information is not provided during your screening process and after a reasonable period of time, it usually means they will not become a successful rehabilitator and the apprenticeship opportunity should be offered to another applicant.

**MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)**

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is a written agreement that is a tool used to help mentors and apprentices’ firm up their expectations of and responsibilities to each other. An MOU has been prepared by the WRNC Mentorship Committee for your use, and below is a list of key items’ you will find helpful within this document.

1. Parties Involved 2. Purpose & Scope 3. Terms Section

4. Expectations of Performance from the Mentor (i.e.)

* Mentor will provide general training, coaching, support, and feedback.
* Arrange for backup help and consultations when mentor is not available.
* Mentor is expected to provide needed oversight and supervision regarding the Apprentice’s progress. This includes frequent communication.
* The Mentor is not expected to provide financial assistance, insurance, or all the services required to perform wildlife rehabilitation activities, such as securing the services of a veterinarian for the Apprentice, building cages, or providing supplies.

5. Expectations of Performance from the Apprentice (i.e.)

* Apprentice is expected to learn and know about, understand, and comply with laws, regulations, and ordinances.
* The Apprentice is expected to become knowledgeable and skillful in the various general aspects of rehabilitation
* The Apprentice is expected to secure the services of a veterinarian and is personally responsible for those costs, if not provided as a public service by a veterinarian
* Prior to accepting any wildlife into rehabilitation, the Apprentice is expected to have certain minimum supplies and resources
* The Apprentice is expected to deliver the highest quality of care possible to wildlife, including feeding and medical treatment schedules, and maintaining proper isolation from humans and domestic animals (including no displaying of wildlife, no pictures, or personal comments on social media about any wildlife without prior authorization from the Mentor)

6. Assumptions of Liabilities 7. Termination of the MOU

Within the MOU, timing, frequency of evaluations, evaluation methods and feedback format should be established and clearly understood between both parties to minimize or prevent any future complications or misunderstandings. It is recommended that the mentor and apprentice review the MOU together, and the document should be signed and dated by both the mentor and apprentice.

**WHEN PERSONALITIES, EXPECTATIONS AND ROLES DON’T GEL**

* While it may be difficult to tell someone that mentoring wildlife rehabilitation may not work for you at this time (for whatever the reason – health reasons or time availability, suitability, etc.) and that they should consider another mentor, it is far better to stop the relationship early rather than delay and compound problems in the future.  This screening step is very important in the process and can make a significant difference for both the mentor and apprentice by saving considerable time, energy, and frustration.
* Also, keep in mind that even though an apprentice applicant may not seem suited for wildlife rehabilitation, they may have a solid grasp on a myriad of other tasks involved in the rehabilitation field such as: telephone hotlines, fundraising, education, political action, and transport. Please explain that these activities can be as beneficial to wildlife as direct care.

**THE GOAL OF OBTAINING A NC WILDLIFE REHABILITATION LICENSE**

* Once the decision is made to mentor a wildlife rehabilitator apprentice, there are also state and/or federal license requirements. These may include a wide range of requirements, from caging/facilities, training, tests, and letter from a veterinarian agreeing to treat wildlife.
* In NC, once the mentor agrees to take on the training of an apprentice, the Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) should be notified by the apprentice applicant and he or she will receive an “apprentice permit” once the Commission approves the applicant’s request. The mentor will be notified when the apprentice permit is received by the applicant.
* Mentorship is a condition of the licensing requirement for applicants seeking federal rehabilitation permits as well as some state rehabilitation licenses. In those cases, both the new rehabilitator and the mentor may be required to complete the application and send letters. This licensing process reinforces the range and extent of the mentor’s responsibilities and liabilities.

**AS A MENTOR,** **BE WISE TO SET LIMITS**

* When some people get their first rehabilitation license(s) (as sub-permittee, novice, provisional, etc.), they may want to admit more animals than they can initially handle.
* It is beneficial for the mentor to encourage starting with a limited number of animals that are relatively stable, healthy, and pose minimum risk. It also helps to limit the number of species that they initially accept. This helps build their knowledge and skill levels as well as helping ensure the animals get effective care. Taking too many animals, or more than one species, in the beginning can decrease the quality of care for the animals and overwhelm or “burnout” the new rehabilitator.
* The need for limits also refers to the mentor. The pressing need for more caregivers may prompt some rehabilitators to want to mentor many new people. This can be problematic. It takes time to train and supervise new people.
* Plus, situations could develop when the mentor would have to take back all the animals in the apprentice/sub-permittee’s care. This could significantly impact the mentor’s facility, workload, and ability to provide quality care.

**EVALUATING PROGRESS IS KEY; MONITOR TASKS & GIVE FEEDBACK**

* Now the real work begins. Once the apprentice is issued a provisional permit and is ready to begin rehabilitating wildlife, the mentor’s role becomes even more involved. The mentor and apprentice need to be in frequent communication.  The mentor needs to monitor the apprentice’s performance and the progress of the animals in his/her care. This review can be accomplished by visiting their house or facility and observing their practices. Rehabilitation records can also be reviewed.
* The mentor needs to stay current on the status and progress of the animals in care. A copy of the daily record of weight, amount fed, condition of any wounds, behavior changes, etc., being kept by the apprentice should be provided to the mentor on a regular schedule.  Sharing of daily documentation for each animal will help the mentor stay informed so they can supervise the progress and stay alert to needs of the wildlife in the care of the apprentice.  Suggestions and feedback from the mentor are also necessary for the apprentice’s learning and to ensure wildlife gets the highest quality care.
* The mentor needs to always monitor performance even if they expect the apprentice’s skills to be at a higher level based on the amount of experience or training. It is also useful for the mentor to note the types of questions, rate of learning, and skill development.

**IF PROBLEMS DEVELOPMENT**

* When problems arise, it is critical to identify and correct them immediately.
* Hopefully, regular communication and observation will enable difficulties to be identified when they are still minor, easily remedied, no harm is done, and it still feels like a “learning opportunity” instead of a crisis. In some cases, the problems may become more serious and need more drastic action. The mentor needs to monitor these types of situations closely.
* If problems with the apprentice are not correctable or if they escalate, resulting in risks to wildlife and people, it is your responsibility to retrieve the wildlife in the apprentice’s care. This can be very difficult on wildlife, the rehabilitator in training and the mentor but necessary.
* As the mentor you will have to make hard decisions such as possibly terminating your Mentor-Apprentice relationship or reverting to earlier training. However, action must be taken to prevent your own license or wildlife rehabilitation status from being adversely affected. Any decision to change mentorship status and the reasons for the action should be documented and communicated in writing to the appropriate licensing agency, which is Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC).

**IN SUMMARY, IS WILDLIFE REHABILITATION MENTORING FOR YOU?**

Mentorship can be accomplished and tailored in different ways, however there are some useful steps to follow:

* First, assess your own motivation, skills and interest in training and supervising new people.
* You must also consider the time commitment and associated risks.  These considerations may result in deciding not to formally mentor new rehabilitators.
* Once the decision is made to become a mentor, planning and preparation is essential.
* As a potential mentor, you must help the potential apprentice understand the full scope of wildlife rehabilitation, and if it is really what the person wants or can do.
* Then you must decide if you want to mentor that individual. If the answer is yes, more exposure to wildlife rehabilitation, including volunteering for basic rehabilitation tasks and training will follow.  This training and volunteer period will be the time to decide if the person is really a “match” for becoming a wildlife rehabilitator.
* Expectations need to be clarified by both parties.  Written documentation of expected learning objectives, performance expectations and standards, and more will help to reduce misunderstanding and reinforce the importance of these items.  It is also beneficial for these discussions to include how communication, coaching and supervision, performance monitoring, and feedback will occur -- for both the mentor and apprentice. While critical to the process, obtaining the actual rehabilitation license is just one of many steps.

**HOW TO BUILD A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP (CLIFF NOTES)**

**Step 1: Identify a potential apprentice or people with which you would like to build a relationship.**

* Can be initiated through an established program, but also, informally by search & discovery or a referral program.

**Step 2: Set expectations.**

* Develop your vision and set corresponding short and long-term goals.
* Establish how and when you will engage with each other.
* Discuss personal time constraints and any possible limitations.
* Determine which forms of communication are most conducive to your relationship structure.

**Step 3: Engage in activities for positive growth and development.**

* Be conscientious of personal gaps or barriers that may limit your ability to cultivate a personalized relationship based on trust.
* Seek out training and/or serve as a connector to help address these gaps.
* Identify professional development opportunities, such as networking events or conferences to attend together.

**Step 4: Establish if and how you will continue your relationship.**

* Celebrate what you have accomplished.
* Determine if your interaction should transition to a new structure or if you would like to continue as is with newly established goals.

**Ideas for enhancing your mentorship experience:**

* Establish expectations for professional behavior and conduct.
* Maintain mutual accountability and responsibility for all involved.
* Follow through on any commitments you have made.
* Think about the qualities you have found to be most helpful in previous academic or professional relationships. What do you wish had been different about any of your previous mentoring experiences? Draw on these experiences to support your new or current mentorship.
* Work together to identify commonalities as well as unique aspects of your lived experiences.
* Strive for mentorship that embraces cultural competency to validate identities and experiences, and support one another while navigating the profession.
* Keep conversations neutral or positive (whether these are conversations within or about your mentorship).
* Schedule meetings in advance or give adequate notice as needs arise to engage with each other.
* Summarize the outcomes of each mentoring session to help establish goals for your next meeting.
* Modify your mentoring experience as you go to what works best for you.
* Suggest and share readings, videos, or other resources you have found helpful or interesting that you can discuss during your meetings.
* Create a space where you can be your whole self without fear of disclosing information. A certain amount of personal disclosure is important to developing interpersonal relationships, but also remember that all involved have a right to privacy. Share as much or as little as you would like to your comfort level.
* Maintain open and honest communication with mechanisms for feedback.

**Suggested topics for mentorship sessions:**

* Introductions and setting goals and expectations
* Work-life balance
* Conflict resolution
* Creating inclusive environments
* Community building
* Communication skills
* Networking opportunities
* Professional development and continuing education
* Job shadowing
* Interview practice
* Volunteer together
* Attend a conference or workshop
* Identifying and applying for funding opportunities
* Self-care
* Time-management
* Personality and/or strengths assessment

**Conclusion**

* There are times of year when wildlife rehabilitation workload is extremely heavy. It is then that the need for additional rehabilitators is felt most desperately and the urge to bring on help may be most strong. This help can come in many forms, including volunteers or new rehabilitation apprentices. However, training new people to be able to rehabilitate wildlife on their own is different from a person working under the rehabilitator’s direct supervision. As such, this process of mentoring new rehabilitators is very different.
* It is a complex and time-consuming activity that should not be taken on in a rush to get more help.  The decision to mentor new rehabilitators needs to be given serious consideration and planning as well as effective implementation.
* The results of a mentorship can significantly affect wildlife, future rehabilitators, and the mentors themselves and deserves to be done well.