

Is Wildlife Rehabilitation for Me?

What Is A Wildlife Rehabilitator?

A wildlife rehabilitator is a person who assists non-domesticated wild animals that are orphaned, injured, sick, distressed, or displaced. The goal of a wildlife rehabilitator is to help these animals reach normal physical, cognitive, and behavioral statuses so that the animals can be released back into their natural habitat. The species of animals that need assistance will vary depending on the wildlife rehabilitator's geographical location.

Wildlife Rehabilitator Must-Haves

If you are considering becoming a wildlife rehabilitator, you need to consider some things, including funds, time commitments, and space.

Funds

A wildlife rehabilitator should be prepared to pay for food, medications, medical care, and caging materials. Most wildlife rehabilitators are not paid and rehabilitate solely as volunteer work. While wildlife rehabilitation non-profits do exist, they rely primarily on grants and public donations to keep operations running. They may have a small staff that receives some compensation for their work, but they depend heavily on the work of volunteers. It is possible, but rare, to find a paid wildlife rehabilitator position at a public educational facility such as a zoo. Wildlife rehabilitators receive no state or federal funding for rehabilitating wild animals in North Carolina.

Time

Wildlife rehabilitation is a form of healthcare, and just like all healthcare fields, the care of the patients must continue despite holidays, weather, personal obligations, etc. Wildlife rehabilitators spend a significant amount of time every day cleaning cages, providing medications, monitoring progress, making changes to treatment plans as needed, keeping records, and feeding.

Feedings, which depend on the developmental stage of the animals and species, heavily influence the amount of time a wildlife rehabilitator spends per day caring for patients. For example, adult squirrels may only need feeding once a day, while neonate squirrels require hand feeding every hour with intervals gradually increasing until they are weaned.

Once an individual begins to be known within their community as a wildlife rehabilitator, the frequency of incoming calls increases. A rehabilitator may often take time to go out and get animals from the caller or rescue an animal in need.

A wildlife rehabilitator should always be prepared to spend time educating the public. Many wildlife rehabilitators work privately from their homes and do not get involved with public education programs in ways that larger wildlife rehabilitation organizations do. However, a wildlife rehabilitator should always expect to have time set aside for those calls in which they have to educate the caller on normal animal behavior and how to monitor the situation.

Space

A wildlife rehabilitator needs to have adequate space for the species they intend to rehabilitate. Appropriate caging size and materials for specific species can be found in the book, *Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation, 3rd edition*, by the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association and the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council.

Space and caging should not be limited to one cage per species. The number of cages needed will depend on the number of animals the wildlife rehabilitator has as well as the developmental stage of the animals. For example, neonatal squirrels should not be kept in the same type of caging as those that are ready for a large pre-release cage.

Animals in rehabilitation should be kept in a quiet area away from people and pets if rehabilitation occurs within a home. A wildlife rehabilitator should also have a separate space to keep animals in need of quarantine so that they are not in contact with any other animals, wild or domestic. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) requires a separate, dedicated space for all wildlife rehabilitators.

Licensing

North Carolina requires that wildlife rehabilitators have a license to hold captive wild animals for the purpose of rehabilitation. Licenses are divided into different categories of species. For example, the license for rehabilitating small mammals includes opossums, rabbits, and squirrels. In contrast, the rabies vector species (RVS) license allows for the rehabilitation of animals such as raccoons, skunks, bats, bobcats, and foxes. Rehabilitation of fawns requires its own license. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) requires a license to rehabilitate birds of any species but it must be obtained from US Fish and Wildlife. Each rehabilitation license has a specific set of requirements that must be met for an individual to receive their license.

Training

Although no continuing education is currently required to keep a wildlife rehabilitation license in North Carolina, it is strongly recommended that a wildlife rehabilitator stays up to date on the newest rehabilitation methods to provide the best quality care for their patients.

In North Carolina, all aspiring wildlife rehabilitators require a one-year mentored apprenticeship. It is necessary that frequent communication with experienced wildlife rehabilitators and courses in wildlife rehabilitation be ongoing. Potential wildlife rehabilitators should be aware that taking in

injured or orphaned wildlife without training puts the animals at risk of receiving ineffective treatment and further suffering. It also threatens unnecessary injury or illness to the animals and the individual attempting to care for them. Additionally, wildlife rehabilitators are responsible for staying abreast of changes to wildlife laws.

Duties of a Wildlife Rehabilitator

- Respond to phone calls from the public regarding animals in need of assistance
- Determine when wildlife is in need versus when it is exhibiting normal behavior for its species
- Arrange transport for animals to the wildlife rehabilitator
- Coordinate rescue of animals when special circumstances exist
- Refer to other wildlife rehabilitation facilities when you are unable to provide assistance
- Evaluate the animals upon intake for a variety of injuries at different severity levels in wildlife of all developmental stages
- Develop a course of treatment appropriate for the needs of the animals and appropriately carry out the course of treatment
- Understand the use of medications for each species as they relate to specific injuries or illnesses causing the need for medications
- Keep documentation of rehab patients as it complies with licensure requirements
- Maintain proper husbandry of the animals based on the needs and requirements of their species
- Understand and provide proper diet and nutrition for the animals based on the requirements of their species
- Understand how to use wildlife formularies
- Communicate with your veterinarian regarding medications and need for medical care outside of the wildlife rehabilitator's abilities
- Assess improvement or decline of the animals while in rehab and determine if changes need to be made as a result of growth or decline
- Appropriately assess quality of life and consider euthanasia when necessary
- Recognize when animals are ready for release and choose appropriate legal sites
- Continue wildlife rehabilitation education through wildlife seminars, classes, reading articles, and following wildlife rehabilitation websites
- Know and keep wildlife laws and regulations

How to Get Started

Someone interested in becoming a wildlife rehabilitator would benefit from observing and/or volunteering with an experienced licensed wildlife rehabilitator before applying for an apprenticeship. Volunteering would allow more hands-on work and give the individual a better perspective of the work they would be doing once they received their own wildlife rehabilitation license.

Each state's wildlife office oversees licenses for wildlife rehabilitation of mammals. In North Carolina, a person seeking a license for wildlife rehabilitation should contact the North Carolina

Wildlife Resources Commission. US Fish and Wildlife should be contacted regarding licenses for the rehabilitation of any type of wild bird. In North Carolina, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission also requires a copy of one's federal license to rehabilitate wild birds.

Commitment

A wildlife rehabilitator should be caring, compassionate, and love animals. However, wildlife rehabilitation goes beyond these positive traits. It also goes beyond being able to commit your time.

A wildlife rehabilitator understands that wild animals are not pets and are intended to be returned to their natural habitat in the wild. They respect the animals' wild instincts recognizing the potential for personal injury yet remaining persistent in their duties if injury does occur.

A wildlife rehabilitator accepts the unpleasant duties that are necessary in caring for the animals and strives to give their best service regardless of the circumstances. Wildlife rehabilitation is more than selecting those animals which are believed to be easy cases or cute and cuddly. Wildlife rehabilitation is pledging to provide assistance or find assistance for wild animals in need within the wildlife rehabilitator's community or outside of their community when called for.

If you are unsure if wildlife rehabilitation is for you, we recommend reaching out to a wildlife rehabilitator in your area to see if volunteering is a better fit. If you do not want to work directly with the animals, there are always opportunities to help in other ways!