Getting Funds, Getting Help, Getting Paid

Turning Passion into Stability

Peggy Hentz - Red Creek Wildlife Center

Fallacies kill. We know this. “I touched it. Now the mother will reject it.” A fallacy we correct all the time. But in wildlife rehabilitation, there are other fallacies that kill. They kill our dreams, our organizations, and sometimes our ability to continue in our passion.

Most rehabbers I talk with feel like they are just surviving. When I listen to rehabber complaints, it usually comes down to three things: not enough money, not enough help, and too much drama in the rescue industry. They are traveling on the survival treadmill.

> “There is no money for wildlife rehabilitation.” Fallacy.
>
> “Wildlife rehabilitation is a volunteer service paying in emotional rewards.” Fallacy.

Twenty years ago, I had been rehabbing animals for over fifteen years. I was balancing a full-time job, a relationship I adored, and caring for every wild creature that came through my door.

My social life and friendships all centered around the rehab. They still do, actually. Wildlife rehabilitation truly becomes a lifestyle. Going to conferences became my vacations. Nights out partying were things left in my youth, except at conferences. Alcohol did survive the transition.

Wildlife rehab was my life, a volunteer activity, a passion that pays in emotional rewards. But I was doing okay. My job paid the bills and covered the expenses of the rehab. I was balancing everything, until life stepped in with a broken furnace, car repairs, and a leaky roof. These weren’t small inconveniences. They were life-and-death emergencies because I needed that money to buy a couple hundred pounds of milk replacer.

Does all of this sound familiar?

I knew of a few larger places that had broken the mold, grew and became successful. Was it luck? Connections?

Today, I feel fortunate that Red Creek is one of those centers, but it hasn’t always been that way.

Thriving, instead of surviving, is possible. I got off of the survival treadmill, and so can you. This session walks you through the changes I made to fundraising, business approach, and most importantly, my beliefs.

Contents

The Power of Being Nice

Before diving into fundraising, staffing, and strategy, I want to start with the most important truth I have learned in decades of wildlife rehabilitation. Success in this work is not built only on knowledge or effort. It begins with kindness.

In wildlife rehabilitation, you never know when a small act of compassion will create a ripple effect. I always remind myself that people may not remember exactly what you did or said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.

A woman once called looking for help for an injured starling. She had already reached out to three other rehabilitators, each of whom turned her away. Their reasoning was simple: a starling is invasive, not native, and has no value.

When she called me, I said, “Bring it in.” She was surprised and asked why I would take it when others would not. I replied, “A life is a life.”

That conversation was quickly forgotten among thousands of similar calls. But a few months later, I was approached by the trustee of the Botstiber Foundation. He told me they had seen our need and wanted to help. The woman with the starling was his sister, and she insisted we were worth supporting. The Foundation went on to fund and build Red Creek’s new rehabilitation clinic, a $1.5 million facility completed in 2024.

That small act of kindness, treating someone with respect and valuing a life others dismissed, changed everything.

Over the years, I have seen many people try to follow the ideas in this handout, including fundraising techniques, volunteer management, organization, and leadership, and still wonder why they struggle. The truth is that none of those things work without kindness. You cannot build trust, loyalty, or a strong team if you treat people poorly.

I have met rescuers who proudly say they work with animals because they hate people. They wear it like a badge of honor. But that mindset will block every bit of success you try to build. The grants, the donors, the volunteers, and the partnerships all grow from how you treat others.

Being kind does not mean being soft. It means leading with respect, patience, and gratitude. It means remembering that the same compassion that drives us to save a bird or a fox must extend to the people who cross our path.

Everything that follows in these pages, every plan, system, and tool, will only work if it is built on that foundation. Because in the end, people may forget what you said, they may forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.

With that in mind, let us look at the practical steps that turn compassion into lasting impact.

Set Your Goals

Before diving into fundraising, you have to ask one important question: What is your goal?

Different goals require different strategies. There isn't a single formula that works for everyone. What works beautifully for one rehabber might completely miss the mark for another. The key is to be honest about what YOU want to accomplish, and then choose the methods that match.

For example, some of us just want to support our current work, to cover food, medicine, cages, and keep the doors open. Others are ready to get paid or hire staff, to move away from volunteering full-time and to start building sustainability.

Maybe your goal is to grow your organization, expand your facilities, increase capacity, or bring in new programs. Or maybe you're thinking ahead about succession planning, making sure the mission continues long after you're ready to slow down.

Here's the thing: funders can't know your goals if you don't. You need to know where you're going so you can bring others along with you. When you are clear, you can inspire confidence, show direction, and make it easy for people to support your vision.

Each of these goals is valid. Each one needs a different approach to fundraising. Once you define your goal, everything else becomes clearer, including what to focus on, how to talk to donors, and where to put your energy.

Why 501(c)(3) Status Matters

No matter what your goals are, becoming a non-profit corporation is essential. It gives your work credibility, allows you to accept tax-deductible donations, and protects you and your volunteers legally. Incorporation is the foundation that lets everything else grow.

Even simple fundraising can go sideways without 501(c)(3) status. A bake sale, a donation jar, or a small online fundraiser might seem harmless, but legally you can run into trouble if you aren't properly registered. Obtaining 501(c)(3) status not only keeps you compliant, it also opens doors to grants, larger donations, and partnerships that are otherwise off-limits.

Fundraising
The Importance of Diversity

When it comes to fundraising, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Relying on a single source of income is risky, and even a great idea can fall short if circumstances change. A healthy fundraising approach is diverse. There are many paths to bring in support:

Direct donations
Educational programs that raise both funds and awareness
Fundraisers that engage your community
Special events
Grants from foundations or local organizations
Passive income

Not every idea will fit every center, and not every strategy will match every goal. The key is to find your niche, the combination that works best for your resources, your audience, and your mission.

Diversifying Donations

Donation Jars

Start at the intake area. This is where the magic begins. Purchase a few acrylic ballot boxes for use at your intake area and at events where you set up a table.

Keep the donation area neat and organized. This shows donors that you are professional and that their support matters. Think of it as "their space" the moment they walk in. Make it clear that donations are expected with simple signage.

Next, consider donation jars in stores. Smaller, acrylic boxes work well for this. Clear jars are far more effective than opaque ones. Add signage that tugs at the heart, something like "Your spare change helps save lives," and include photos of cute patients if possible. A powerful twist is a "before and after" jar. Show a baby animal in need versus a healthy release. It is visual, emotional, and immediate.

Put seed money in the donation jars. A donation container that looks active encourages others to give. A jar with a little cash already inside draws more donations than an empty one.

For donation jars that can be monitored, we use larger seed bills ($20 or $50). People tend to follow the crowd. Larger bills will encourage larger donations. For this reason, we avoid seeding with coins and remove coins when they are donated.

For donation jars that are not monitored by you, such as checkout locations at local businesses, use a $1 bill as seed money. This bill also serves as a theft alarm and can protect your donations. One simple method is to discreetly mark the bill. When emptying the jar, check for the marked bill. If it disappears, remove that jar and rethink its placement.

Know the Rules

Before placing donation jars in stores or other public locations, it is critical to learn and follow the solicitation laws in New York State. Rules vary by city and county, and some businesses may require permits or written permission. Not following the laws can create serious legal problems, even for small donations. Take the time to understand what is allowed and always get approval from the business owner before placing a jar.

Requesting Donations at Intake

There are two easy ways to ask for a donation when someone brings in an animal. The first is to have a written form for them to fill out with their information. On this form, have a line asking if they are donating today.

Many finders, dealing with an emotional emergency of finding an animal, arrive without cash. Have these finders leave with an information handout requesting a donation. This paper can also include any information you'd like them to know, such as your policies, your mission, etc.

Red Creek sends each finder off with paper that gives them their animal's intake number, a method of following up on their animal, and a coupon for sending a donation.

Red Creek Wildlife Center
300 Moon Hill Drive
schuylkill Haven, PA 17972

Clinic - (570) 739-4393
Office - (570) 739-7111
redcreekwildlifecenter.com

Case Numb	Admission Date	Species
28735	**3/30/2021**	**Striped Skunk**

Thank you for caring enough about this wild creature(s) to bring it to Red Creek Wildlife Center. We believe all life is precious and will do everything we can to help this animal recover so it can be released back into the wild.

Getting updates on your animal

If you wish for an update on your animal, please go to https://redcreekwildlifecenter.com/updates. You can also use option #3 on our phone line, however, it fills up quickly. We will get back to you as time allows. Please understand updates can take some time. Animal care takes precedence over updates, so we get to them when possible.

Please do not request an update by email or on FaceBook. Email and Facebook are accessed at a different location than our patient files, and these requests are difficult to follow up on.

Please Donate

Red Creek Wildlife Center admits over 4,000 animals each year, and our expenses exceed $300,000.00 annually. We operate solely on YOUR DONATIONS and EVERY DOLLAR COUNTS! Many centers close to new intakes because of limited capacity, increasing Red Creek's workload even more. Your help is critical to help keep our services available.

You may donate now, send in a gift later, or contribute through our website. However you choose, funds go directly to the care of the animals.

Gift Coupon

Please accept
this gift of $_____

Case Numb **28735** **Striped Skunk**

Mail to:
Red Creek Wildlife Center
300 Moon Hill Drive
Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972

Bonnie [redacted]
[redacted]
Reading 19601

Or donate on line at:
https:/redcreekwildlifecenter.com

Website Donations

Website donations are another critical piece of fundraising. Placement matters more than people realize. The top right triangle of your website is prime real estate. Make it easy for visitors to find the Donate button there.

By placing the donation button at the top of the right sidebar, you can have it show up on every page of your website.

Credit Card Processors and Management Tools

Be careful when signing up with companies that promise to help organize and streamline donations. These platforms promise to manage donor relationships, and run different types of campaigns like peer-to-peer, auctions, and events. These services are rarely free, and fees will eat away at your donations. Know what they offer and the costs.

The platform fee is the price you will pay to use the online fundraising platform or tool. This is also sometimes called the monthly or yearly fee.

The transaction or processing fee is the price you pay each time your donors use a credit card to submit a donation to you or one of your fundraisers. This is usually calculated as a percentage of the transaction plus a small fixed fee.

Zeffy.com

For online processing, we now use Zeffy.com. It's simple to set up, secure, donor-friendly and best of all, they do not charge your organization processing fees.

How do they make it free for us? Simple. They ask the donor if they could add a small percentage to offer it to the non-profit for free. It's optional and the donor can opt out, but enough say yes to make it cost-effective for this non-profit platform.

Building Steady Support

One-time donations are wonderful, but recurring donations are what keep your rehab running smoothly. Even small monthly gifts add up over time and give you a predictable income stream. You can encourage this by offering simple ways to sign up, whether online through your website or with a short paper form at intake. Many online processors (such as PayPal and Zeffy) offer this when someone makes a donation. It's as simple as checking a box and donors can quit any time they want.

Membership programs are another way to engage donors consistently. Offer different levels with small perks that make people feel included and appreciated. Maybe it is a quarterly newsletter, behind-the-scenes photos, or updates on patients they helped. Memberships turn casual supporters into invested friends who feel like part of your mission.

Other creative donation strategies can complement these approaches. Think about gift drives for specific items, sponsorships for individual animals, or programs where donors can "adopt" a

species or enclosure. These methods give people a tangible connection to your work and let them see the direct impact of their support.

The key is to offer multiple options. Some people will give online, others in person, and some may prefer a small recurring commitment. When you diversify how people can give, you make it easy for everyone to participate.

Non-Monetary Donations

Some donors don't just want to give money. They want to see exactly what their support buys. Non-monetary donations let people feel that tangible connection to your work. They can see the bottles of formula, the boxes of bedding, or the feeders they are helping provide, and it makes their gift feel real.

Creating a wish list is an easy way to organize these needs. You can post it on your website, share it with your network, or use it during tours or events. Here are some common sites where rehabbers set up wish lists:

- Amazon – Offers Amazon Wish Lists or Amazon Charity Lists that can ship directly to our center.
- Chewy – Pet supplies, food, bedding; easy to set up and share with supporters.
- RodentPro.com – Specialty rodent diets and supplies, popular for rehabbers.
- Walmart – Allows registries and gift lists; items can be shipped or picked up locally.
- Target – Provides registries and wish lists for nonprofits or personal use.
- Petco – Offers registries for animal supplies and can ship directly.
- PetSmart – Allows wish lists and donations of specific items for organizations.
- Etsy – Can create wish lists for handmade or specialty supplies, or link to specific items.
- Bed Bath & Beyond – Gift registries and wish lists for bedding, towels, and other items.
- Office Depot / OfficeMax – Great for organizational supplies, can create wish lists and link for online orders.

This list is not even close to being complete. Do a Google search or go on ChatGPT and request a search for websites with non-profit wish lists.

When donors can see what their contributions provide, it deepens their connection to your mission and often encourages repeat support.

Saying Thank you

Saying thank you is one of the simplest and most powerful tools in fundraising. It lets your donors know they matter and that their support makes a difference.

Thanking your donors consistently is not just polite. It encourages repeat giving, strengthens relationships, and reinforces the idea that supporting your work is meaningful and appreciated.

Whenever possible, thank people in person. A quick word at intake, during a tour, or at an event shows immediate appreciation and builds a personal connection. Be genuine. If you're a hugger, offer a hug.

For digital donations, use automated emails to acknowledge gifts right away. Personalize them if you can. A few thoughtful sentences that explain how the donation will be used can leave a lasting impression. Again, Zeffy and PayPal offer easy setup of automated emails.

When someone sends a check, never skip written snail mail. A hand-signed note may seem old-fashioned, but it is memorable and shows that you value their effort. You can mention specifically what their donation will support, whether it is formula, cages, or enrichment supplies or you can keep it more general.

Red Creek sends out a one-page monthly mail merge thank-you letter for all mailed donations. Each month highlights an animal patient. Many donors give monthly and say they look forward to their monthly animal story.

Make mailing easier by incorporating window envelopes with your return address in the upper corner. Format the letter so the sender's name and address show through the window. This eliminates having to handwrite addresses or apply stickers to the envelope.

This method streamlines the thank-you mailing process and avoids a mismatch between a letter and an envelope label. A hand-signed letter makes it even more personal, but this can be an embedded image as well.

Take note in the following thank-you letter, how the thankyou is written in a HERO SANDWICH style format. I will talk about that more in the next section.

Red Creek Wildlife Center

300 Moon Hill Drive
Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972

DONATION RECEIPT

DONATION AMOUNT
$ 25.00

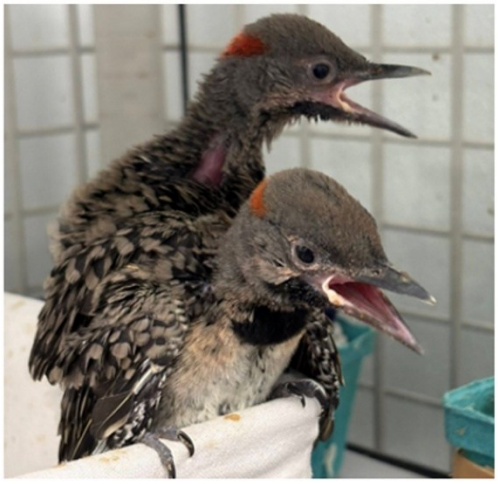
DATE OF DONATION
5/14/2025

CHECK NUMBER
6091

Julie [redacted]
Pine Grove, PA 17963

Monday, October 20, 2025

Dear Julie,



Thank you for your generous donation to Red Creek Wildlife Center . Your donation is going directly to animal care. So far in 2025, we have received almost 1,700 animals. Over 500 are currently being cared for today, and most of these are babies.

Each animal that comes to us is unique and needs special diets, caging and enrichment, such as these two Northern Flickers that were orphaned. Fickers are a type of woodpecker and eat insects. Because of your support, we have everything we need to care for a multitude of baby animals.

Your support means the world to us. We could not care for the number of animals that we do if it were not for you.

With gratitude,

Peggy Sue Hentz
Red Creek Wildlife Center – Founder

Year-End Appeals

Year-end appeals are one of the most effective times to fundraise. Many people plan their giving according to a year-end or year-beginning tax strategy. The holidays are also a time for giving. People are often more generous. People are thinking about giving, reflecting on the year, and looking for ways to make an impact. Timing and messaging matter more than you might think.

Red Creek has used two formats for our year-end appeals: a single letter and a multipage newsletter.

The Single Letter

Most organizations use the year-end appeal to highlight their own achievements. They think that showing how much of a difference they've made encourages people to support them. However, many people donate because of personal emotional reasons. Instead of showing the difference the organization has made, highlight the difference the donor has made. **Make them the hero**.

Start by picking a heartwarming story about one of the animals saved during the past year. The more the story tugs on your heartstrings, the better. Then wrap that story in a "HERO Sandwich".

A hero sandwich is a story wrapped in a thank you. and it makes the donor the "HERO."

One of our biggest revenue generating year-end appeal letters was about two geese. The letter was only one page printed on one side with a three-paragraph story.

> *Dear {Insert First Name Merge Field}*
>
> *I wish to take a moment and THANK YOU for being part of Red Creek's team! Even though it has been a challenging and busy year for Red Creek, because of you, we were able to help over 4,200 animals this past year. Although that number demonstrates the impact you have on helping save wildlife, nothing shows your success better than the touching story of two Canada geese rescued together this October.*
>
> *Bonnie, a Wildlife Capture and Transport volunteer, responded to a call about a pair of geese in Boscov's parking lot. The birds huddled together and wouldn't leave. She discovered that one, a female, had a severely injured foot and couldn't walk. The other, a male, and probably her mate, was uninjured but wouldn't leave her side. Bonnie gathered up both birds and brought them to Red Creek.*
>
> *Once at the center, the injured foot was bandaged, and the goose was given strong antibiotics. The infection in its foot had started to become systemic, making her very weak. The antibiotics would fight the infection, but the bird needed to fight to regain her strength. We housed the birds together, and the male cuddled closely, protecting and comforting the female. As the female goose got healthier, the male encouraged her to eat, stand, and later walk. As she regained strength, both birds became more active and vocal. They remained inseparable and slept with their necks intertwined.*
>
> *It took about a month for her foot to completely heal, and they were released together in a natural area. They calmly walked from their crate before flying side-by-side across the lake to continue their lives together.*
>
> *Because you care enough to support us, we were able to save these two lovebirds. With your continued support, together, we can make a difference, one (or two) animals at a time.*
>
> *From all of us at Red Creek Wildlife Center, have a safe and festive holiday season and a happy new year!*

The letter was short enough to allow for pictures that also added an emotional impact. Using mail merge personalized each letter with the donor's first name, making donors feel seen and appreciated.

Red Creek Wildlife Center
300 Moon Hill Drive
Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972

Clinic - (570) 739-4393
Office - (570) 739-7111
redcreekwildlifecenter.com

December 3rd, 2020

Dear James [redacted]

I wish to take a moment and **THANK YOU for being part of Red Creek's team!** Even though it has been a challenging and busy year for Red Creek, **because of you**, we were able to help over 4,200 animals this past year. Although that number demonstrates the impact you have on helping save wildlife, nothing shows your success better than the touching story of two Canada geese rescued together this October.

Bonnie, a Wildlife Capture and Transport volunteer, responded to a call about a pair of geese in Boscov's parking lot. The birds huddled together and wouldn't leave. She discovered that one, a female, had a severely injured foot and couldn't walk. The other, a male, and probably her mate, was uninjured but wouldn't leave her side. Bonnie gathered up both birds and brought them to Red Creek.

Once at the center, the injured foot was bandaged, and the goose was given strong antibiotics. The infection in its foot had started to become systemic, making her very weak. The antibiotics would fight the infection, but the bird needed to fight to regain her strength. We housed the birds together, and the male cuddled closely, protecting and comforting the female. As the female goose got healthier, the male encouraged her to eat, stand, and later walk. As she regained strength, both birds became more active and vocal. They remained inseparable and slept with their necks intertwined.

It took about a month for her foot to completely heal, and they were released together in a natural area. They calmly walked from their crate before flying side-by-side across the lake to continue their lives together.

Because you care enough to support us, we were able to save these two lovebirds. With your continued support, together, we can make a difference, one (or two) animals at a time.

From all of us at Red Creek Wildlife Center, have a safe and festive holiday season and a happy new year!

In your service,

Peggy Sue Hentz
Director – Red Creek Wildlife Center

All Pennsylvania non-profit solicitations are required to include the following statement:
"The official registration and financial information of Red Creek Wildlife Center, Inc. may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1 (800) 732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement

Include a #9 envelope with your mailing address printed, so making a donation is easy.

Include a link or QR code so, making a donation online is even easier.

Finally, plan ahead. Don't wait until December to craft your message. Build your story, gather your images, and schedule your appeal so it lands at the right time and reaches as many supporters as possible.

We send out our appeals on December 11th.

Using a Professional Mailing Service

For years, Red Creek used mail merge to print the year-end appeal. I would sit and stuff envelopes for days, or we would have a letter stuffing party with ten or more volunteers assembling the mailing. This took a great deal of time and a lot of printer ink. Once our mailing list exceeded 500 people we researched using a mailer company.

After a thorough search and comparing different companies, we settled on Appeal Printing. This company advertises that it specializes in non-profit mailings. They not only helped us design a beautiful one-page appeal letter, a donation coupon, and pictures on the envelopes, they also helped us apply for the non-profit reduced postage.

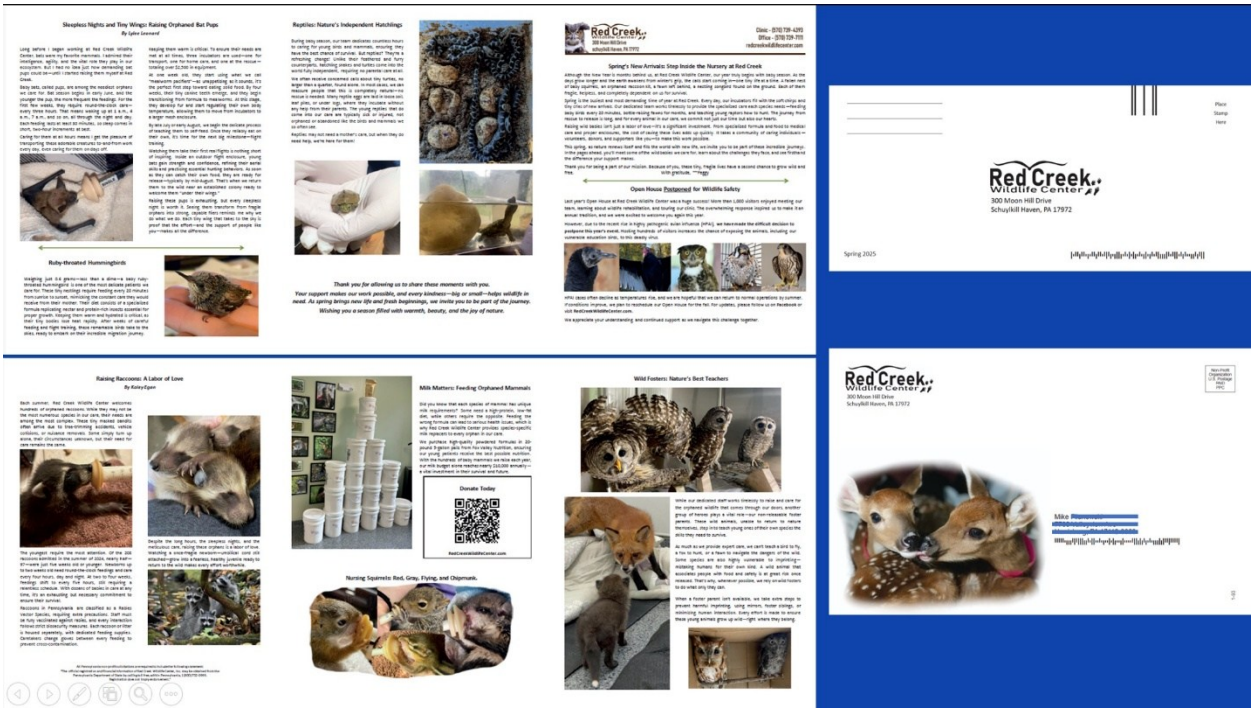
This first mailing was cost-effective, and it saved time and stress. We continue to use Appeal Printing to this day.

https://www.appealprinting.com

Multi-Page Newsletters

Following our first successful mailing using the mailer service, we decided to try a multipage newsletter. This was six pages packed with animal stories with room for call out boxes highlighting events and fundraisers, and lots of pictures.

The newsletter starts with a personal, heartfelt letter from me using the HERO SANDWICH format. In this letter, I could highlight current happenings at the center and welcome the donors to our newsletter, but it always begins and ends with a sincere thank you.



Again, Appeal Printing came through with a professional design and layout, far beyond our ability to produce in-house. The response from donors was overwhelming and resulted in our most successful year-end appeal up to that point.

The newsletter was so successful, we now produce a seasonal newsletter three times a year: baby season, summer, and our year-end appeal.

Email Newsletters

Whenever you publish a printed newsletter, format it for email as well. Not everyone checks their mailbox, and a digital version allows you to reach a broader audience instantly.

Mass emails should always be sent through an email service provider. This protects your email address and IP reputation from being labeled as spam. It also allows you to create professional-looking campaigns, track results, and manage your contact list efficiently.

There are many platforms available. Use whichever one you are most comfortable with. I can only recommend those I have used personally: Vertical Response and Mailchimp.

Several other services offer free or discounted plans for nonprofits.

Free or Low-Cost Email Services for Nonprofits

- **Zeffy:** A completely free fundraising platform for nonprofits, including an email marketing tool with no transaction or platform fees.
- **MailerLite:** User-friendly and perfect for smaller contact lists. The free plan includes templates and automation tools.
- **Mailchimp:** Reliable and widely used. The free plan has limits on subscribers and monthly emails, which suits small organizations.
- **Vertical Response:** Offers free or reduced-cost services for nonprofits, with a monthly email limit before discounts apply.
- **Brevo:** Formerly Sendinblue, this service provides free plans with automation and contact management features.

Before you begin sending newsletters, **make sure you follow all email solicitation and privacy rules.** Always get permission before adding anyone to your email list. Add a sign-up link on your website and give subscribers a simple way to opt out in every email. Unsolicited or repetitive messages can damage your reputation and reduce trust.

Finally, take advantage of the reporting tools your email platform provides. These reports show open rates, click-through rates, and subscriber activity. Use them to learn what works and what doesn't. At Red Creek, we have found that email newsletters generate fewer direct donations than printed mailings, but they keep our audience engaged and informed between campaigns.

Writing an Effective Email Appeal

A strong email appeal feels personal, not promotional. Think of it as writing a short letter to a friend who already cares about wildlife.

The Subject Line is your first impression. Keep it short and emotional. It should make the reader curious enough to open the email. Examples:

> "You helped save a life today"
>
> "A baby owl needs your help"
>
> "See what your support made possible this month"

Use a Personal Greeting whenever possible. "Dear Friend" works in a pinch, but "Dear Susan" is better. Many email programs allow you to insert names to personalize the email.

Start with one short, emotional story about a single animal. Let the reader picture that life you helped save or the one still waiting for help. Add a photo if your platform allows.

After the story, connect it to the bigger picture. Explain how their support keeps the doors open, buys food and formula, or funds medical supplies. Make sure they understand the impact they have.

End with one simple, direct request. Do not overwhelm the reader with options.

> "Give now to help more animals like this one."
>
> "Your donation today makes the next rescue possible."

Add a bright, simple "Donate" button that links directly to your donation page. Keep the path short and distraction-free.

End with Gratitude. Even if they do not donate this time, thank them for caring. Gratitude builds loyalty and long-term support.

How Often to Send Email Newsletters and Appeals

Finding the right balance is important. Too few emails and people forget who you are. Too many, and they start to tune you out or unsubscribe.

A good general rule is **one regular newsletter per month** and **two to four appeals per year.** Your newsletter keeps supporters connected through updates, photos, and short stories. Appeals are for specific fundraising goals.

You can also send short, timely updates for special events, emergencies, or seasonal messages. Just make sure every message has a purpose.

Not every email should ask for money. Mix in education, behind-the-scenes looks, and good news stories. People like to see the results of their support. When they trust that you are doing good work, donations naturally follow.

Most email platforms allow you to segment your contact list. This means you can send appeals only to people who already give and lighter updates to those who are still learning about your organization. This keeps your emails relevant and helps reduce unsubscribes.

The most important thing is consistency. Choose a rhythm that you can maintain year-round, and stick to it.

Online and Social Media Appeals

Social media is one of the most powerful and inexpensive tools available to wildlife rehabilitators. It connects your supporters to your daily work in real time. When used thoughtfully, it can inspire giving, recruit volunteers, and build long-term trust.

The key to success online is **connection before collection.** People give to people they know, like, and trust. Use your posts to build that connection.

Share Stories, Not Just Needs

A photo of a healthy release tells a better story than a long paragraph about how much something costs. Let your followers see the faces behind your work, both human and animal. They want to be part of something positive and hopeful.

Use Variety

Mix it up. Combine stories of rescues and releases, educational posts, and occasional behind-the-scenes photos of staff or volunteers at work. Sprinkle in needs-based posts only when necessary. When every post asks for money, people stop listening.

Ask Clearly, But Not Constantly

When you do make an appeal, be clear about what you need and why. “We need formula for orphaned squirrels” works better than “Please donate.” Be specific and keep it short. Include a link that goes directly to your donation page or Zeffy form.

Timing Matters

Evening posts often perform better than morning ones because that is when people are scrolling and relaxed. Holidays, weekends, and weather-related posts can also boost engagement when the content connects emotionally.

Engagement Over Follower Count

Ten loyal followers who regularly share your posts are more valuable than a thousand who never comment. Respond to comments, thank people publicly, and show appreciation for their involvement. This builds real relationships that last.

Include a Call to Action in Every Appeal

Every fundraising post should end with a clear next step. "Click to donate," "Share to help more animals," or "Sign up to volunteer" are all good examples.

Always Link Back to Your Website

Social media is the invitation. Your website is the front door. Make sure every post that asks for help leads directly to your donation or membership page.

Keep Your Voice Authentic

You do not need to sound like a marketing expert. Speak the way you do in person — caring, real, and hopeful. People respond to honesty more than polish.

Connection Before Collection

People give to people they know, like, and trust. Before asking for donations, build that relationship. Share stories, show the faces behind your work, and let your followers see your care and dedication.

When supporters feel personally connected, they want to be part of your success. Donations then become a natural next step, not a pressured ask.

Building connection first creates loyal supporters who stay, give again, and bring others along with them.

Social Media Plan and Schedule

Social media is powerful, but we know that as wildlife rehabilitators, your time is limited, especially during baby season.

Planning posts doesn't need to take hours every week. The key is **efficiency and small, consistent actions**.

Decide Your Rhythm

Post consistently, but keep expectations realistic. Even **1–2 posts per week** is enough to maintain engagement. A longer story or video once a month works if time is tight.

Focus on Short, Impactful Content

Not every post needs to be a perfect photo with a long story. Quick updates, a single animal photo, or a short "rescue of the day" note keeps your audience connected without adding stress.

Use a Simple Content Calendar

Even a small calendar helps. Use a wall calendar, a whiteboard, or a simple spreadsheet. Add just the essentials: the post type, image, or story idea. Check it once a week, or even once a month, to plan ahead.

Batch Tasks When You Can

If you have a moment to take photos or jot down quick story notes, do several at once. Later, you can schedule posts in advance when you have a quiet moment.

Track and Adjust

Use metrics sparingly. Look at likes, comments, and clicks to see which posts resonate. Focus on what works and drop what doesn't. Engagement matters more than perfection.

Protect Your Energy

Your work with wildlife comes first. Social media is important, but it should never compete with life-saving care. Plan realistically around your busiest seasons, and don't be afraid to take a short break from posting when needed.

Keep Your Voice Authentic

Even simple posts have an impact if they are honest and caring. Speak as you would to a friend. Your passion and dedication shine through without polish or extra effort.

Social media can be a powerful tool, but it can also magnify mistakes quickly. Here are the pitfalls I see most often and strategies to avoid them.

The "Instant Appeal"

One common trap that rehabilitators fall into is the impulse to post immediately when an animal comes in. It's natural. The animal is in dire straits and you want help fast. "We need donations to save this little one" seems urgent, necessary, and harmless.

But there is a downside. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the animal does not make it. Then you have to share the news of its death. And this can happen repeatedly. I know of a rehabilitator who experienced this again and again. Every post followed the same rhythm. We got this animal in, we need your support, and then it died.

This pattern can wear down both the audience and the rehabilitator. Donors start to feel helpless, frustrated, or even skeptical. And it adds emotional stress for you, reliving the loss each time you have to announce it publicly.

At Red Creek, we handle it differently. When a new patient comes in, we take photographs and document everything. We hold off on going public until we know the animal is likely to make it. That way, when we share the story, the ending is hopeful. Our audience sees progress and success, and our posts are emotionally uplifting rather than discouraging.

People do not usually realize that a post might be two weeks after the actual rescue. By waiting, you maintain trust, protect your supporters' emotions, and reduce the pressure on yourself while still sharing the work you do every day.

Do this instead

Document First, Share Later

- Photograph and document every new patient.
- Wait to go public until there is a hopeful outcome.
- Sharing progress builds trust, keeps donors engaged, and protects your own emotions.
- Remember, posts are often two weeks after the rescue. Timing matters more than immediacy.

Drama, Drama, Drama

Some posts are fueled by conflict, frustration, or personality clashes. If your authentic self leans toward drama, consider having someone else manage your social media. Posts that stir controversy rarely help your mission and can drive away supporters.

Drawing Out Haters

Negative comments are inevitable. You do not need to respond to every criticism. Sometimes, letting comments sit allows them to be buried naturally. If you have a loyal following, they will often defend you and correct misinformation without you having to engage.

Posting Inappropriate Pictures

Never post images that show unsafe handling practices. Always wear proper PPE and show your work ethically. Your images represent your professionalism and the trust donors place in your care.

Not Proofreading Your Work

Errors in spelling, grammar, or facts can undermine credibility. Take a moment to review your text before posting. A few extra seconds can prevent confusion and help maintain your professional image.

Over-Sharing Personal or Emotional Details

It is natural to care deeply and want to share your emotions, but too much personal information or repeated posts about stress and frustration can fatigue your audience. Keep the focus on the animals, the mission, and positive outcomes. Share your humanity sparingly and strategically to maintain credibility and engagement.

By avoiding these common mistakes, you protect your organization's reputation, build trust with your audience, and ensure your social media presence supports your mission rather than undermines it.

Post with Purpose

Before you hit "Post," ask yourself:

What is the goal? Inform, inspire, thank, or ask? Every post should have one clear purpose.

Does it fit our mission? Keep every message connected to your core purpose — helping wildlife.

Is it positive or hopeful? Even difficult stories should end with what was learned, how help made a difference, or how others can get involved.

Would I say this in person? If it sounds like something you would say face-to-face, it will feel authentic online.

Does it invite engagement? Ask questions, encourage sharing, or thank people publicly.

A consistent, purposeful voice builds trust and keeps your followers engaged for the long term.

Donor Recognition

Everyone wants to know their contributions matter. Create a digital or physical donor wall, or feature donors in newsletters. Recognize donors publicly, but also remember that a private thankyou can mean even more.

You can also list donors on your website, but limit this to major projects or set a clear timeframe or minimum donation amount. Otherwise, you end up with a never-ending list of small donations that becomes cluttered and quickly outdated. Keep it meaningful by celebrating milestones rather than every contribution individually.

Recognition Tiers:

Plaques or physical displays for major gifts or milestones

Website or newsletter mentions for special projects or limited-time campaigns

Personalized thank-you letters or emails for smaller contributions, showing that every gift is appreciated

At Red Creek, we built a beautiful recognition wall after our building campaign was completed. It not only honors those who helped make the dream a reality but also serves as a daily reminder of how much community support can accomplish. A display like this adds warmth to your facility and gives visitors a sense of shared pride.

Special Giving

Some donations go beyond everyday giving. Red Creek provides guidance on these options on our website, but we do not actively solicit them.

Memorial and Honor Gifts

Sometimes people want to give in memory or in honor of a loved one, a beloved pet, or even a favorite species. These gifts often carry strong emotion and connect donors to your mission on a personal level. Zeffy provides a way to automatically email the family if the donor knows their address.

How Red Creek handles this: Online donations receive a standard thank you. Mailed checks get a standard mailed thank you noting the donation is in honor or memory of (insert person). Following a funeral announcement mentioning “in lieu of flowers,” we wait about a month and send the family a letter listing the names and contact information of donors. This allows families to send their own thank yous. We never indicate donation amounts.

Monthly or Recurring Donors

One-time donations are wonderful, but predictable monthly support keeps the doors open. Recurring donors can be the backbone of financial stability. Even small amounts add up when people give consistently. Show them how dependable income helps cover formula, feed, and medical supplies year-round.

On our website, we give instructions for setting up automatic check mailings through online banking, which allows us to receive 100% of the donation. Zeffy and PayPal also allow donors to make recurring gifts.

Legacy Giving and Bequests

It may feel awkward to bring up, but inviting supporters to include your organization in their will or estate planning ensures their love for wildlife continues long after they are gone. Even small bequests can make a big difference.

Again, we do not actively solicit these gifts, but provide instructions and guidance on how supporters can include us in their planning on our website.

QR Codes

QR codes are a simple way to connect supporters to your donation page, website, or specific fundraising campaign with a single scan from a phone or tablet. They remove friction and make it easier for people to give or learn more instantly.

How they work:

A QR code is a type of barcode that, when scanned, directs the user to a specific URL. You can place them on posters, event tables, flyers, newsletters, or even in your intake area. When someone scans the code, their device opens the link automatically — no typing required.

Where to get them:

There are many free options to create QR codes. Zeffy allows you to generate a QR code linked directly to a donation form on their site.

Other free generators include:

- QR Code Generator – free for basic codes, paid options for analytics or branding
- QRStuff – free for static codes, paid for dynamic codes or tracking
- GoQR.me – simple, free, and easy to use

Some services offer time-limited codes or require a fee for ongoing tracking or dynamic links. If you want to track scanning activity or make the link changeable later, be sure to check whether your service supports dynamic QR codes.

Using QR codes consistently makes donating easier for supporters and can be a subtle, high-impact addition to every fundraiser or outreach effort.

QR Code Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- Place codes where people can easily scan without bending or crowding
- Keep the QR code size at least 1.5–2 inches for printed materials
- Test the code before printing to ensure it links correctly
- Use a short, clean URL if creating the code manually
- Include a simple call-to-action, like "Scan to Donate"

Don't:

- Put codes on dark or busy backgrounds that make scanning difficult
- Place codes too low or too high where people cannot reach them
- Overload one page with multiple QR codes — it confuses scanners
- Forget to track results if you want to measure success

Fundraising

Fundraising is different from general donations. It is usually a planned event or a time-limited campaign with a specific goal. Unlike ongoing donations, fundraising often involves public outreach, a set target, and a clear start and end date.

Examples include special events like galas, auctions, or benefit dinners. Online campaigns can also be structured around a goal and deadline, such as seasonal drives or peer-to-peer challenges. The key is planning and communicating a purpose, so supporters understand exactly what their contributions will achieve.

While donations keep your organization running day-to-day, fundraising allows you to accomplish special projects, meet urgent needs, or grow your resources beyond what regular donations can provide.

The importance of fundraisers

Fundraising is not just about collecting money. It is a tool to help you reach specific goals. Whether you want to support your current work, hire staff, grow your organization, or plan for the future, a well-planned fundraiser provides resources that donations alone may not cover. Fundraising also raises awareness, brings new supporters into your community, and can create momentum that carries beyond a single campaign.

Creative Fundraising for Small Wildlife Rescues

When people think of fundraising, they often picture galas, golf tournaments, or elaborate multi-day events. Those types of fundraisers can work well for human-focused charities or even large wildlife centers and SPCA organizations with full-time staff and volunteers dedicated to events.

Most small rescues and individual wildlife rehabilitators don't have that kind of help. Between feeding, medicating, and caring for the animals, finding time to plan and execute a large-scale fundraiser can feel impossible. The following ideas are designed specifically for small rescues. They are hands-on, realistic, and achievable, even for a solo rehabilitator or a small team.

In this section, I'll also point out the time wasters (the things that didn't work for Red Creek) and highlight the approaches that were most successful. The goal is to give you ideas that actually fit your schedule and resources, helping you raise funds while staying focused on your mission.

Creative Fundraising Ideas for Small Wildlife Rescues

Fundraising doesn't have to be elaborate or expensive. The best ideas often come from your mission itself and your community's love of wildlife. These approaches work well for small rescues and solo rehabilitators.

And you have the best helpers for attracting people to your events: the animals themselves. We will talk about doing animal programs later, but having animals that can safely and legally be on view during events will draw people in and their donations.

Host events that let people experience your work firsthand. Open houses, guided wildlife walks, educational workshops, or family days give the public a personal connection to your mission. Even a simple meet-and-greet with education ambassadors can inspire donations and support. However, balance the amount of preparation against the probable funds raised. Spending weeks putting together an event that raises only a few hundred dollars may not be the best investment of your time.

Restaurant Fundraisers

Many restaurants are willing to donate a percentage of an evening's proceeds to support a nonprofit. It can be a true win/win for everyone. The restaurant gains new customers and goodwill, and your organization receives funds and visibility in the community.

There are limits to how much a restaurant can raise in one night since seating and serving capacity are fixed. Most events bring in a few hundred dollars rather than thousands, but that is still meaningful support with very little effort.

This type of fundraiser works best when the restaurant donates a portion of its sales for a full day or during a specific time period. The more people who show up, the more everyone benefits. Promoting the event is up to you. Set up an information table outside the restaurant and bring an education animal if it is safe and legal to do so. Nothing draws a crowd like meeting a live owl or hawk up close. The preparation time is minimal, which makes this a simple, low-stress option that is easy to fit into your schedule.

If a venue requires you to pre-sell meal tickets, think carefully before agreeing. At Red Creek, we usually decline those offers. Pre-selling tickets for an event that will only generate a few hundred dollars is rarely worth the effort. However, if you have an enthusiastic team—such as students or volunteers who love to help—you can certainly give it a try. Otherwise, thank the restaurant and move on to the next opportunity.

If you plan to have live animals present, keep your display outdoors. Be mindful of the weather and have shade or shelter available for both the animals and your volunteers. Like any outdoor event, conditions can change quickly, so a little planning ahead can make the difference between a comfortable afternoon and a stressful one.

Round Up for Wildlife

Have you ever checked out at a local grocery store and been asked to round up to the next dollar for charity? Your organization can be that charity.

Next time you're asked to round up, talk with the manager and find out who to contact to get on the charity list. Some stores have favorite charities they already work with, and it may take time to get on the rotation. But it will never happen if you don't ask.

At Red Creek, we requested a spot with Kimberton Foods and it took almost a year for our turn to come up. When our month arrived, we set up an information table one Saturday afternoon with a vulture and an owl. Customers loved it, but even better, the employees loved it and promoted the roundup for the rest of the month. One ask and one afternoon netted over $7,000 for the animals.

Yard Sales or Mini Markets

Yard sales are a classic and surprisingly effective way to raise funds. I know one small-scale rehabilitator who covers most of her expenses each year with a single weekend yard and bake sale. She puts out a call for donated items from her community, sets up at her home-based center, and spends the weekend selling treasures for wildlife. The money raised pays for much of her purchased food, formula, and supplies.

You can easily make an event like this your own. Host it at your facility, a nearby park, or even a friend or neighbor's driveway if parking is better there. Advertise that all proceeds go directly to wildlife care. People love finding bargains, especially when they know their purchases help animals in need. Adding a few education ambassadors can make it even more engaging. An owl perched nearby or a hawk greeting visitors tends to open both wallets and hearts.

One challenge with yard sales is what to do with leftover items. Plan ahead for this. Arrange for a donation pickup from a thrift store, or set aside a storage space if you plan to host another sale later. You can even end the event with a "fill a bag for five dollars" deal to clear things out. A little preparation on the back end can make this simple, community-driven fundraiser both manageable and rewarding.

Sponsor-an-Animal Programs

Many people want to feel they are helping a specific animal. Create sponsorship opportunities for your education ambassadors or for common patients. Sponsors receive a photo and story of "their" animal, and updates if possible. This gives the donor a personal connection while providing steady income for food, care, and housing.

Managing this kind of program can be time-consuming if handled year-round, but it doesn't have to be. Red Creek occasionally offers adopt-a-critter packets as a Christmas gift program. Centralizing the effort to a specific time of year keeps the workload manageable and avoids adding stress during baby season when everyone is already swamped.

Our Website Promotion went like this:

Give the Gift of Life

Do you or someone you know love wildlife? Here's an opportunity to give yourself, or someone you love, a special gift this Christmas that will impact the lives of the animals at Red Creek Wildlife Center.

How it works

Each adoption packet is $50.00

Order an "Adopt a Christmas Critter" packet before November 10th. The packet will be mailed to you or the person of your choice around December 10th.

Each package includes:

- a Christmas Card announcing your gift
- an 8X10 photograph of the animal
- an adoption certificate
- a biography of the animal
- a fact sheet about that species
- a sponsorship sticker
- the satisfaction that you are making a difference in the lives of many wild animals

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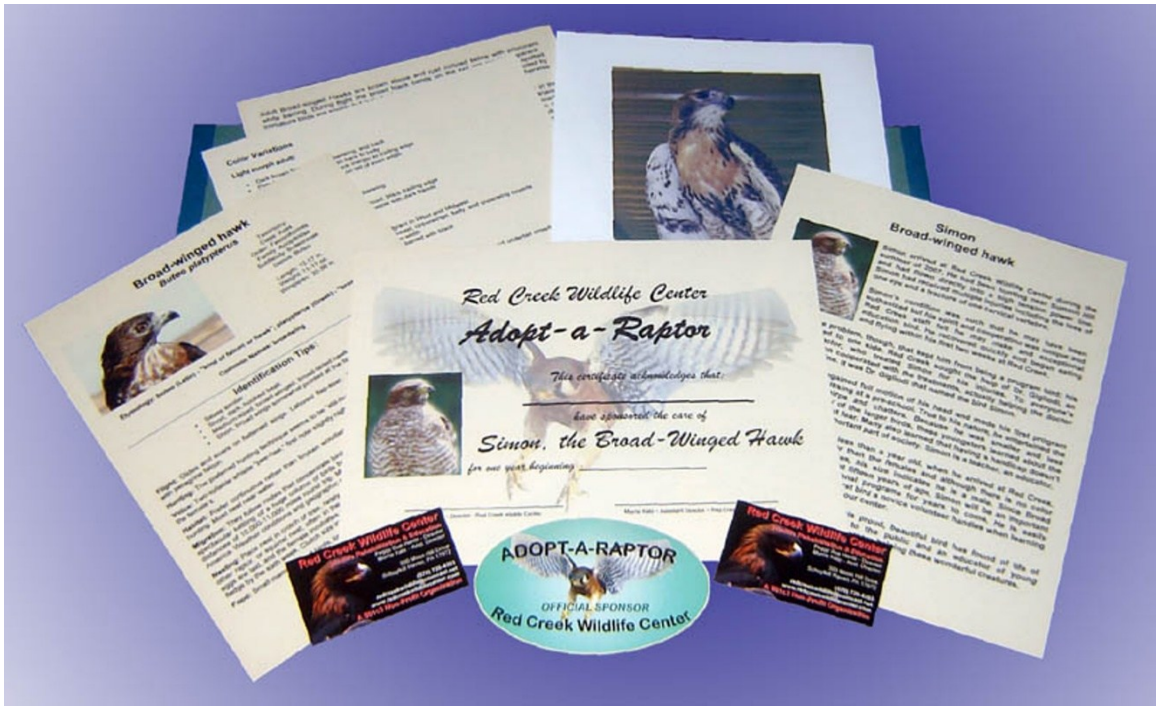
We had six animals to choose from. Each donor filled out a form of who the gift was for and where to send the packet. Make sure to get the person's contact information, including a phone number, in case the order gets confusing.



Adopt – A – Raptor Packet

Themed Walks or Fun Runs

Organize a short walk or fun run with a wildlife twist. Charge a small registration fee and encourage participants to get sponsors. A creative name makes the event memorable and mission-focused, such as a "Squirrel Sprint" or "Owl Stroll." Keep the route simple and local so it is easy to manage with a small team.

We held a Wildlife Walk this past summer that raised around $1,000. Tickets were sold through Zeffy, and we printed event shirts for helpers and for early bird walkers who registered by a specific date. The day of the walk, we planned to sell additional Red Creek t-shirts and our books. We also had a hot dog stand and live music for entertainment.

Unfortunately, attendance was low because the weather that day reached nearly 100 degrees. That experience taught us one important lesson: outdoor events are always at the mercy of the weather. No matter how much effort goes into planning, heat, rain, or snow can change

everything. Always plan for the unexpected. Have pop-up tents for shade and rain, and consider scheduling an alternative date for bad weather.

It is also important to have liability insurance, whether you maintain coverage year-round or purchase a short-term event policy. This protects you if anyone gets hurt during the event.

Other tips:

- Keep registration simple by offering online sign-ups and same-day registration.
- Provide water and shaded rest areas if the weather is warm.
- Ask local businesses to sponsor small items like bottled water or snacks. It cuts costs and builds partnerships.
- Have volunteers stationed along the route for both safety and support.

Even with challenges, walks and runs can be great fundraisers. They raise awareness, build community, and connect people to your cause in a fun and healthy way.

Seasonal or Holiday Events

Wildlife Baby Showers

A wildlife baby shower can be one of the most heartwarming and engaging fundraisers of the year. Spring is baby season for wildlife rehabilitators, and it is also the perfect time to invite your supporters to help you prepare for the flood of little mouths to feed.

If you have a local venue, make it a real event. Decorate with pastel colors, animal-themed balloons, and signs that say “Welcome, New Arrivals.” Plan lighthearted games, raffles, and maybe even door prizes, just like a traditional baby shower. Create and publish a list of your most-needed items so people can bring donations of formula, bedding, or cleaning supplies instead of baby gifts. You will be amazed at how generous people can be when they see exactly what is needed.

If a physical location is not possible, host your wildlife baby shower online. Facebook events work beautifully for this. Go live throughout the day with short features of different species, educational moments, or sneak peeks behind the scenes. It keeps the day lively and helps donors feel connected to your work.

This is also the perfect time to put your wish lists to work. Update your lists on Amazon, Chewy, or wherever you host them, and share the links in your event posts. Many people who would never think to mail a check will happily send a box of formula or a case of paper towels when they know it is needed. Whether online or in person, a wildlife baby shower builds community, brings in supplies, and celebrates the start of another busy season of saving lives.

Holiday-Themed Fundraisers

Holiday-themed fundraisers give people a fun reason to visit and support your work. A spring hatchling open house or a Halloween “Critter Carnival” can include small activities, photo opportunities, or crafts. Keep the focus on interaction and experience rather than large-scale production.

Red Creek has hosted many holiday events that have done very well. Pictures with Santa, Halloween costume contests, and fun nights have all been great community builders. These events invite families to enjoy themselves while learning more about wildlife.

If you cannot host events at your own location, be creative when choosing venues. One of our favorite locations is a local winery that allows us to use the space for free. We have held several events there. One of the biggest was a thirtieth birthday party for Gabby, Red Creek’s ambassador Great Horned Owl. Gabby is well known and well loved by the community, and her birthday party was a huge success. We paired the celebration with raffle drawings, shirt and book sales, and the winery also gave us a generous donation because of the extra wine sales.

When choosing a venue, look for businesses that already draw the type of crowd you want to reach and share your community values. Approach them with a clear proposal that highlights how the event benefits them as well. A good partnership can turn into an annual tradition that people look forward to. Over time, these shared events become part of your community identity, building stronger relationships and lasting goodwill.

Community Classes or Workshops

Offer short educational workshops, such as “Bird-Friendly Gardening,” “Wildlife First Aid Basics,” or “Animal Tracking for Kids.” Charge a small registration fee or suggest a donation. Your expertise is the draw, and these events help people feel engaged while supporting your work.

Do you, or someone in your organization, have a special talent you can share? Hosting classes can be fun, valuable to your students, and profitable for your organization. Teaching something you love can connect people to your mission in a new and personal way.

I love to paint, and I also love to teach and share what I know. I have always enjoyed the old Bob Ross programs where he would paint a scene in an hour, so I wondered if I could do something similar. Paint and sip events are popular, but rather than advertise one publicly before I knew how it would go, I decided to try it with a private class for our staff and volunteers. It was a huge success. We called it *Painting with Peggy.*

To make this a repeatable event and keep it connected to our mission, we decided to paint simple animal portraits instead of landscapes. Our first class featured owls, and we invited one of our ambassador owls for a special visit. It turned out to be the perfect mix of art, fun, and wildlife education. Participants learned about owls while painting one, creating a memorable and meaningful experience that fully supported our mission.

Learning to Work with AI

Artificial intelligence can be an incredibly useful tool for wildlife rehabilitators. It can help you brainstorm ideas, organize your thoughts, and even generate content for handouts, newsletters, or social media. The key is learning to **prompt effectively**.

A prompt is simply the instruction you give an AI. The more precise and clear you are, the more useful the results. Include details like tone, audience, format, or any constraints. You can also add context about your organization or your goals. Think of it as giving directions to a very capable assistant who needs clarity to do their best work.

For example, when I wanted to generate creative, small-scale fundraising ideas specifically for wildlife rehabilitators, I gave the AI a list of what I already wrote myself, along with this prompt:

"Can you think of any more active fundraising ideas that are not passive and not just filler. Real ideas that would work for wildlife rehabilitators. Things that are unique, outside the box, creative and new."

The AI returned **15 actionable ideas**, including events like Wild Art Nights, Wildlife Olympics, Rehab Reality Challenges, Creature Quest Scavenger Hunts, Wild Mystery Box Auctions, Paint and Sip Owl Classes, Wildlife Trivia Nights, Twilight Behind-the-Scenes Tours, and more. Each idea was designed to be **hands-on, mission-centered, and achievable for small rehabilitators or solo practitioners**.

Using AI this way doesn't replace your expertise or creativity. It simply helps expand and organize your ideas quickly. You provide the context, constraints, and feedback, and the AI helps you explore possibilities you might not have considered.

> **Absolutely. Here are some fresh, real-world fundraising ideas designed specifically for wildlife rehabilitators — ideas that are interactive, mission-centered, and effective without being overdone or "filler." These can stand alone or be adapted to fit different seasons or local opportunities.**
>
> ---
>
> ### 1. Wild Art Night
>
> **Partner with a local artist or host your own event where guests create animal-themed crafts — painting feathers, clay paw prints, or wildlife silhouettes. Add a live ambassador animal appearance or story between sessions. You can charge a registration fee and also auction off finished artwork donated by local artists.**
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2. “Sponsor a Species” Live Draft

Turn your sponsorship program into an event. Create a “draft day” livestream (like a fantasy football draft) where donors choose a species to sponsor. Each sponsorship unlocks stories, videos, and updates about that species through the season. People love competition and exclusivity — let them “claim” their favorite species before someone else does.

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3. Wildlife Olympics

Set up fun, family-friendly games themed around animal skills — like “squirrel agility course,” “fox scent challenge,” or “hawk eyesight test.” Charge entry fees or sell team registrations. End with an educational demo featuring ambassador animals to connect fun with purpose.

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4. Rehab Reality Challenge

Create a one-day event where participants “step into a rehabber’s shoes.” They move through timed stations representing real tasks — mixing formula, preparing enrichment, setting up an enclosure, identifying species, or “triaging” stuffed animals. It is fun, fast-paced, and educational. People leave amazed at what rehabbers actually do.

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5. Wild Mystery Box Auction

Collect unique wildlife-themed boxes with secret contents — each box has a theme (Owls, Raccoons, Songbirds, Foxes). Contents can include merchandise, artwork, behind-the-scenes photos, or even a “meet an animal” experience. People bid without knowing everything inside — the mystery drives participation.

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6. Creature Quest Scavenger Hunt

Host a nature-based scavenger hunt, either in-person at a park or virtually through social media. Clues can be about local species, tracking signs, or environmental trivia. Each registration supports rehabilitation, and local businesses can sponsor or donate prizes.

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7. “Admit Slip” Reenactment Day

Invite the public to experience the intake side of wildlife rehabilitation. Set up mock admission stations where participants learn to identify species, assess injuries, and make intake notes on “patients.” Add a few ambassador animals for comparison. It is deeply educational and builds respect for the complexity of your work.

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8. Wildlife Rehab Escape Room

Design a small pop-up escape room themed around “saving” a wild animal. Teams solve puzzles using clues about habitats, species ID, and rehab procedures. It can be set up in a meeting room or even outdoors with portable props. This one draws crowds at festivals and events.

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9. Wild Tails Storytelling Night

Host a live storytelling or open mic night with themes like “Wild Encounters,” “Creatures That Changed Me,” or “Rescues I’ll Never Forget.” Rehabbers, volunteers, and the public can participate. Charge an entry fee or accept donations, and record the stories for social media content later.

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10. Behind-the-Scenes Twilight Tour

Offer evening tours of your facility with soft lighting, small groups, and quiet ambassador introductions. Include stories about nocturnal species, enrichment setups, and “a day in the life” of a patient. Add refreshments or a small gift shop table at the end.

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11. Animal-Themed Trivia Night

Host a wildlife trivia night — online or in-person. Include questions about local species, fun animal facts, or wildlife myths. Offer small prizes or sponsor-backed rounds. It is inexpensive to run, easy to repeat, and connects people to your mission in a fun way.

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12. Wildlife Workshop Series for Kids

Offer short, hands-on sessions where children learn wildlife skills — building nest boxes, identifying tracks, making enrichment toys. Each session has a small fee and teaches real conservation values. Parents love activities that combine learning and doing good.

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13. “Day in the Life” Sponsor Stream

Run a live-streamed “workday” showing safe parts of your rehab process, narrated with humor and heart. Viewers donate to “sponsor” parts of your day: $10 for formula prep, $25 for cleaning supplies, $50 for vet care. Real-time updates keep it engaging.

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14. Wildlife-Themed Subscription Box

Create quarterly “WildCare Kits” that include small gifts — stickers, photos, a story from rehab, and a small educational item. Subscribers feel connected year-round, and you can highlight real patients or success stories in each box.

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15. Habitat Restoration Days

Host volunteer workdays focused on planting native species or cleaning a nearby stream. Participants register with a donation, and local nurseries may sponsor plants. It builds community while serving your broader conservation mission.

Memberships and Subscriptions

Years ago, a membership meant being allowed to visit on special occasions or membership days. It could also mean getting perks like a t-shirt or a mug. Today, perks are digital and visits are often virtual. Membership programs are another creative way to support your wildlife rehabilitation work. Instead of one-time donations, people pay a small monthly fee—sometimes just a few dollars—to become part of your community and gain exclusive access to content. This type of income is incredibly valuable because it is recurring and predictable, helping you plan for food, medical supplies, and ongoing care for your animals.

Websites like Patreon, Ko-fi, and Buy Me a Coffee make it easy to set up a membership system. Supporters can receive perks such as early access to stories, behind-the-scenes videos, educational content, or updates on specific animals. This is the same model that successful podcasts and creators use to turn consistent content creation into revenue.

Members are usually easygoing and want to help. They are invested in your mission, so bouncing ideas off of them builds community and provides real-time feedback. You decide how much content to provide and how often. Some wildlife rehabilitators post weekly video updates about animal care or fun educational tidbits. Others may create a members-only newsletter with photos and stories. The key is giving people a sense of connection and exclusivity—they are part of the journey, not just donors.

One of the biggest advantages of memberships is that even small monthly contributions add up quickly when you have many supporters. Just a few dollars from fifty supporters is a reliable income that can cover things like formula for a week of babies or a month of enrichment supplies for your education animals.

Memberships also allow you to experiment and create content that aligns with your mission. You can see what resonates with your audience, adjust perks, and continually build a community that loves and supports wildlife, all while creating a relatively passive income stream.

Membership Perk Ideas for Wildlife Rehabilitators

The best perks are personal, simple, and tied to your mission. People love feeling connected to your work and the animals you care for. Here are some ideas that have worked well for wildlife centers and creators alike:

1. Exclusive Videos and Updates

Share short, members-only videos of feedings, releases, or enrichment time with education animals. These don’t have to be polished—authentic moments are what people love most.

2. Name an Animal

Offer supporters the opportunity to name a specific animal in care. You can make this a higher-tier perk. It creates a special connection, especially if you provide an update when the animal is released.

3. Virtual Meet-and-Greets

Schedule live video sessions where members can meet your ambassador animals and ask questions. These can be casual and fun—just a coffee chat with your followers and the animals they support.

4. Early Access to Stories or Photos

If you write, film, or post updates about your rescues, let members see them first. This small gesture makes them feel part of your inner circle.

5. Members-Only Merchandise

Create a limited-edition design—maybe a shirt, mug, or tote bag—only available to your members. You can even rotate new designs every season to keep it fresh.

6. Behind-the-Scenes Tours

Offer a virtual look into your facility. Show how enclosures are built, how diets are prepared, or how animals are evaluated for release. These insights deepen understanding and respect for your work.

7. Monthly Q&A or Storytime

Host a casual online gathering where you answer wildlife questions, share updates, or tell stories from the past month. These events build friendships as much as they build support.

8. Downloadable Goodies

Digital wallpapers, coloring pages, or printable animal fact sheets can make fun low-cost perks. If you already create content for classes or outreach, you can repurpose parts of it here.

9. "Sponsor a Species" Program

Offer memberships centered on specific species—songbirds, foxes, owls, or turtles. Supporters can follow updates on their chosen group and learn more about their care and natural history.

10. Annual Recognition or Thank-You Gifts

Send a personalized thank-you letter or certificate each year to show appreciation. People cherish acknowledgments and love knowing they made a difference.

Creating a membership program is as flexible as you want it to be. Whether it's a single tier with simple perks or a full multi-level system, the goal is to connect your supporters to your mission and let them share in the joy of helping wildlife.

Getting Started with Memberships

Launching a membership program does not have to be complicated. Start small and grow as you learn what works best for you and your followers.

1. Choose a Platform

There are several good platforms designed for creators and nonprofits. Patreon is one of the most popular, but you can also look at Buy Me a Coffee, Ko-fi, or Memberful. Each offers monthly subscriptions, private content sharing, and community tools. Some wildlife centers even build memberships directly into their websites using plugins like Paid Memberships Pro or MemberPress.

2. Decide on Tiers

- You can begin with one simple level or create several with increasing perks. For example:
- $3 per month – access to behind-the-scenes posts
- $10 per month – add exclusive videos and a quarterly Q&A
- $25 per month – includes everything above, plus naming rights or a members-only shirt
- Start simple. You can always add more options later once you see how people respond.

3. Build Your Perks Around Connection

People join because they care about you and your mission. Offer them experiences and insights that make them feel part of your team. Authenticity and gratitude go a long way.

4. Keep it Manageable

It's easy to get excited and overcommit. Choose rewards that fit easily into your regular work routine. A short live stream, a few photos, or one extra story post a week can make your members feel valued without taking too much time.

5. Promote It Naturally

Invite your existing followers to join. Mention it at programs, on your website, and in newsletters. Tell them exactly how their membership helps wildlife—it makes a difference when people understand where their support goes.

6. Keep the Conversation Going

A membership program is a relationship. Ask members for input, share upcoming plans, and thank them often. These small touches keep people engaged and happy to renew month after month.

Programs: The Staple of Wildlife Rehabilitation Funding

Programs are one of the most reliable and rewarding ways to raise funds while also sharing your message. People love meeting animals up close and learning from someone who lives this work every day. It's one of the few fundraising activities that not only supports your center but also directly fulfills your mission of education.

Types of Programs

- **Live Wildlife Programs** – Featuring ambassador animals is always a hit. People remember the animals long after the program ends.
- **Domestic Animal Programs** – Great for classrooms or scouting groups, especially if you can tie them into responsible pet ownership or animal behavior.
- **PowerPoint Programs** – Ideal for professional groups or civic clubs. You can adapt your content for audiences that can't have live animals on-site.
- **Book Readings** – If you've published books or stories, use them to build connection and inspire. Kids love to meet the author, especially when the animals in the stories are real.

Talk Ideas for Rehabilitators

Here are a few tried-and-true ideas that keep audiences engaged:

- *Owl Sounds:* Teach your audience how to identify owl calls and quiz them at the end.
- *Who Inspires You?* Talk about Rachel Carson and the people who made conservation personal.
- *Natural History of a Species:* Pick one animal and let your passion shine.
- *What People Can Do to Help Wildlife:* Everyone wants to make a difference. Show them how.
- *What to Do if You Find Wildlife:* Practical advice builds trust and connection.
- *How You Became a Rehabilitator:* Share your story. People love the "why."
- *Motivational Topics:* Use your work as a metaphor for resilience and compassion. "Live life on your terms" has always been one of my favorites.

Advice from 30+ Years of Speaking

After three decades of presenting programs, here's what I've learned:

- **Teach what you know — and what you don't.** If you're asked to talk about a species you don't usually handle, say yes. The research you do to prepare will make you a better rehabilitator.
- **Never do free programs or "whatever you can afford."** Setting your price shows your value. People often don't appreciate what they think is free.

- **Remember to price your time realistically.** The program itself may be an hour, but that's not the full investment. Add in travel, setup, packing animals, winding down afterward, and unloading once you get home.
- **Learn to say no.** If an event doesn't fit your schedule or values, it's okay to turn it down. Protecting your time and your sanity helps ensure that when you do say yes, you can give your best self to the audience.

Pricing Your Programs

Setting a price for your programs isn't just about making money, it's about showing value. When you give away your time and knowledge for free, people often treat it as if it has no worth. Setting a clear, fair fee shows that your expertise and your animals' participation matter.

Your price should cover **all** the time you invest, not just the hour you're standing in front of the audience. Think about everything that goes into it:

- Preparing and packing the animals
- Travel time and setup
- The presentation itself
- Wind-down time after the event
- Driving home and putting everything away

When you add it all up, you'll see why "a quick program" isn't quick at all.

If you're just starting out, you can use a tiered approach until you find what works best for your area:

- **Small local events or schools:** $150–$250
- **Community organizations or libraries:** $200–$350
- **Corporate, college, or special events:** $300–$600+

If travel is involved, include mileage or a minimum fee to make it worthwhile. It's okay to adjust based on group size, distance, or whether they're providing extra exposure that truly benefits your organization.

And remember, saying no is part of professional boundaries. If the timing, distance, or compensation doesn't make sense, decline politely and save that energy for the programs that truly matter.

When Your Work Keeps Working For You

Once you have your community built and your supporters engaged, it's time to think about ways to keep the funds flowing with less effort. Memberships are wonderful for creating a consistent monthly income, but they still take time and attention. Passive income, on the other hand, keeps working even when you are not.

Think of it as building small systems that support your mission around the clock. The work happens upfront (creating classes, writing books, or designing products) but once those are in place, they continue to earn income year after year.

In the next section, we'll look at how you can create true passive income streams tailored to your own strengths and interests. Whether through digital content, print-on-demand items, or creative educational tools, these methods can give you long-term stability and free up more time for what you love most - caring for wildlife.

Passive Income

Passive income is money you earn on an ongoing basis from work or products you create once. It is not truly passive at first. You need to invest the time, energy, and resources to set it up before it starts bringing in income on its own. For wildlife rehabilitators, the creation phase is best done in the off-season when your workload with animals is lighter. For me, that often means winter. That is when I do most of my writing, planning, and content creation.

The benefits of passive income can be substantial. Red Creek has offered online wildlife rehabilitation classes for years. Building these classes took many winters and a lot of effort, but once they were established, they required minimal ongoing work. Then, when COVID hit, we lost a significant portion of our in-person programs and service revenue. At the same time, people were at home looking for engaging activities. Our online classes suddenly boomed. The income generated not only offset the loss of in-person revenue but actually exceeded it.

Creating passive income streams helps stabilize your finances, support your mission year-round, and protect your organization from unexpected disruptions.

Turning Wildlife Photos into Passive Income

One of the biggest advantages wildlife rehabilitators have is access to a variety of animals that most people never see, especially babies. Those unique photos are more than just memories—they can become a source of passive income. With print-on-demand services, you create the product once and let the company handle printing, shipping, and customer service. You are not

managing inventory, which keeps your overhead low and your time commitment minimal. The effort is front-loaded, but after that, it's mostly hands-off.

Print-on-demand products can include:

- **T-shirts and hoodies** featuring your animals or educational designs
- **Calendars** with a photo for each month, especially appealing with baby or seasonal wildlife
- **Mugs** showcasing cute or charismatic species
- **Notebooks and journals** with animal photos on the cover
- **Greeting cards** or postcards for holidays, thank-you notes, or just for fun
- **Stickers and magnets**—small items that are easy to sell online or at events
- **Phone cases** or laptop sleeves with wildlife designs
- **Tote bags** featuring educational or conservation messaging

The key to success is **quality and uniqueness**. Your audience is paying for photos they cannot get anywhere else. Tie products back to your mission, educate while you sell, and highlight that proceeds support wildlife care.

This approach works especially well in the off-season, when you have more time to curate your photos, design the products, and set up the online store. Once it's set up, each sale generates revenue without additional effort.

Tips for Making Print-On-Demand Work for Wildlife Rehabilitators

Even though print-on-demand is mostly hands-off once set up, a few strategies can help maximize your income:

- **Seasonal Products:** Tailor products to the time of year. Baby animals in spring, holiday-themed designs in winter, or fall wildlife in September and October. This gives people a reason to buy now rather than later.
- **Highlight Baby vs. Adult Animals:** People are drawn to cute, baby wildlife, but adult ambassador animals with personality can also sell well. Mix it up for variety.
- **Bundle Products:** Offer a calendar with a matching set of postcards or stickers. Bundles increase perceived value without increasing your effort.
- **Connect Products to Your Mission:** Include small blurbs on the product page explaining how proceeds support wildlife care. This reminds buyers their purchase matters.
- **Keep Designs Simple and Recognizable:** Your audience should immediately see that it's your animal. Don't overcomplicate the design but attaching a logo marks it as yours.
- **Update Occasionally:** Refresh products with new photos each year or each season to encourage repeat customers.
- **Market Strategically:** Promote products through newsletters, social media, and at events. Avoid spamming. Focus on connecting with people who already care about wildlife.

- **Leverage Limited Editions:** Highlighting a limited number of items or a seasonal design creates urgency. People are more likely to purchase if they feel it is special or temporary.
- **Protect Your Photos:** Consider watermarking your images lightly or attaching your logo before uploading them for print-on-demand or online sales. Keep it subtle so it doesn't distract from the design, but enough to discourage others from stealing or misusing your photos.

Choosing the Right Print-On-Demand Company

There is an unlimited number of print-on-demand companies out there, which can feel overwhelming at first. The key is finding a company that fits your needs, whether that's for a short-term fundraiser or a long-term online store.

I personally look for American-based companies when possible. I check their ratings and reviews online to make sure they are reliable and produce high-quality products. I even ask AI to review them as well, which helps summarize experiences and flags potential issues.

Some companies are ideal for short-term projects, like a single holiday fundraiser or a themed baby animal campaign. These platforms often let you create a product quickly and have a low barrier to entry. Other companies are better suited for a permanent store setup, where you can maintain a catalog of designs and sell year-round. Knowing your goal will help you choose the right platform and avoid wasted effort.

By carefully selecting your print-on-demand partner, you can make your wildlife photos work for you while minimizing hands-on management and ensuring your products meet a high standard.

Short Term Fundraisers

For wildlife centers looking to raise funds through t-shirt sales, consider these platforms:

- **Bonfire** offers a straightforward, online-only approach, ideal for nonprofits seeking a hands-off fundraiser with no upfront costs. It's perfect for those wanting to create a campaign and let the platform handle the rest.
- **Custom Ink** provides a more customizable experience, with a wide range of products and design assistance available. It's suited for groups desiring a full-service experience with options for promotional items beyond apparel.
- **Broken Arrow Wear** caters to organizations needing bulk orders with personalized support. They offer a variety of products and work closely with groups to ensure their fundraising needs are met.

Each platform has its strengths, so consider your center's specific needs and resources when choosing the best fit.

Feature / Platform	Bonfire	Custom Ink	Broken Arrow Wear
Best For	Nonprofits seeking a hands-off, online-only fundraiser	Groups desiring a customizable, full-service experience	Organizations needing bulk orders with personalized support
Setup	Free, no upfront costs; online campaign builder	Free, with optional design assistance	Free, with design support and order management
Product Range	Limited to apparel and accessories	Extensive, including apparel, accessories, and promotional items	Wide range, with options for apparel and promotional products
Branding Control	Limited; Bonfire branding on packaging	High; customizable packaging and labels	High; customizable packaging and labels
Shipping	Bonfire handles all shipping; international options available	Custom Ink manages shipping; international options available	Broken Arrow Wear manages shipping; international options available
Fees	No platform fees; profit from sales	No platform fees; profit from sales	No platform fees; profit from sales
Support	Email and chat support	Phone, email, and live chat support	Phone and email support

Online Store

If you are thinking about running a full-time print-on-demand store, I usually recommend looking at companies like Printful or Printify. With these, you can set up a full-time store without ever touching inventory. Everything is printed and shipped on demand, which makes it pretty hands-off once it's up and running.

The beauty of this is passive income. People can buy your shirts, mugs, calendars, or whatever you create online all year long.

Branding is something to think about. Printful tends to feel a little more professional, which is great if you want a polished look for your wildlife art or logo. Printify can give you better margins, but you may need to pay a bit more attention to details.

My best tip is to start small. Order a few samples first to make sure the print quality and colors are exactly what you want. You want people to fall in love with your wildlife designs, not be disappointed when the product arrives.

Feature / Platform	**Printful**	**Printify**
Ease of Use	Simple, integrates with Shopify, WooCommerce, Etsy, Squarespace	Simple, integrates with most platforms; must select print provider
Product Quality	Consistent, premium-quality prints	Quality varies by provider; some inconsistency
Branding Options	Custom labels, packing inserts, premium experience	Limited branding options; depends on provider
Pricing	Higher base costs → smaller margins	Lower base costs → better margins
Shipping	Flat rates, predictable times	Varies by print provider
Best For	High-quality, branded, reliable merchandise	Cost-conscious fundraising with flexible product range

Using Art for Passive Income

As a wildlife rehabilitator, you have access to animals in ways most people only dream of. That access gives you a unique perspective that can be expressed through art. Whether you enjoy drawing, painting, or experimenting with digital or AI-generated designs, your creations can reach a wide audience.

Art can be turned into passive income through children's books, coloring books, or storybooks featuring wildlife. Once created, these products can be sold online as downloads or printed copies, providing ongoing revenue with very little day-to-day effort.

The same designs can also be used for print-on-demand merchandise. An illustration of a baby raccoon, a rehabilitated owl, or another education ambassador can appear on shirts, mugs, calendars, and tote bags. This allows you to generate multiple streams of income from a single piece of art.

Creating the content takes work upfront, but once it is done, it continues to earn income while you focus on caring for the animals you love.

Art-Based Passive Income Ideas

Children's Books

Write and illustrate storybooks about your animals, your experiences, or fictional adventures inspired by real wildlife. You can sell printed copies, e-books, or both. Educational tie-ins, like teaching kids about animal care, make the books even more appealing.

Coloring Books

Simple line drawings of baby animals, ambassador animals, or native wildlife can be compiled into coloring books. These can be sold as printed books or as downloadable PDFs for parents and teachers.

Wall Art and Prints

High-quality prints of your wildlife photography or illustrations can be sold online or through local gift shops. Limited edition prints create a sense of value and exclusivity.

Stationery and Cards

Turn your designs into greeting cards, notecards, calendars, or postcards. These are easy to produce through print-on-demand services and appeal to animal lovers.

Educational Posters

Create posters that teach about wildlife care, species identification, or conservation tips. These can be sold to schools, libraries, or directly to supporters online.

Merchandise Tie-Ins

Use your art on mugs, tote bags, t-shirts, or other print-on-demand items. Each design can become multiple products, multiplying your income from a single idea.

Activity Books

Combine puzzles, mazes, and educational games with your artwork. These are great for children and schools and can be offered as printed books or digital downloads.

Specialty Journals

Create wildlife-themed journals or planners featuring your illustrations. Supporters may purchase them as gifts or personal use, and they are easy to sell online.

Jigsaw Puzzles

Jigsaw puzzles are another fun way to turn your wildlife photography or artwork into passive income. People love spending time with puzzles, and wildlife images—especially baby animals, ambassador animals, or unique species—make them extra appealing.

You can create puzzles using print-on-demand companies that handle the production and shipping. This way, you don't need to store inventory or manage fulfillment. Just upload your design, choose the puzzle size and piece count, and let the company do the rest.

Consider offering limited edition puzzles featuring special animals, seasonal images, or fundraising tie-ins. They make excellent gifts, and a well-loved animal can become the face of a recurring puzzle series. Puzzles can also complement other merchandise, like calendars, coloring books, or children's storybooks, creating a cohesive line of products for supporters.

Top 10 Wildlife-Themed POD Products

- **Mugs and Tumblers** – Always popular! Use animal photos, funny quotes
- **Tote Bags** – Feature species silhouettes or "I support wildlife rescue" designs.
- **T-Shirts and Hoodies** – Your best sellers. Include seasonal designs or local wildlife themes.
- **Phone Cases** – Small but impactful. Feature your animal ambassadors.
- **Wall Calendars** – Showcase your best release photos or ambassador portraits.
- **Notebooks and Journals** – Perfect for wildlife lovers to take notes or sketch.
- **Stickers and Magnets** – Low-cost impulse buys at events or add-ons in online stores.
- **Puzzles and Games** – Jigsaw puzzles or memory games for kids.
- **Posters and Art Prints** – Educational or inspirational designs featuring native species.
- **Greeting Cards** – Holiday, thank-you, or birthday cards using your animals' photos or art.

Activity-Based Wildlife Products

Games are a playful way to engage supporters and teach children about wildlife while generating passive income. Memory games, matching card sets, or simple board games featuring your animals or educational facts are a big hit. Kids love them, parents love that they are learning, and wildlife gets a friendly introduction early.

You can turn your photos, illustrations, or even AI-generated art into these games. Print-on-demand companies can handle production and shipping, so you don't need to store anything yourself. Start with a few simple designs, like a "Who Eats What?" matching game or a "Guess the Baby Animal" memory game.

Other ideas include wildlife bingo, scavenger hunts with cards, or trivia card decks. Each game reinforces education, encourages repeat play, and creates a way for your supporters to engage with your mission long after they receive the product. Games also pair well with coloring books and puzzles, letting you create a small line of wildlife-themed educational products.

Wildlife-Themed Games as Passive Income

Again, I turned to ChatGPT for ideas on other passive income options. I want to be clear—this handout, session, and eventually the book were not generated by AI. But here, I want to show how AI can help you develop ideas that are fresh, creative, and tailored to you. These are unique suggestions I never would have thought of on my own.

Games are not just fun—they can become steady income streams while teaching about wildlife. By turning your ideas into tangible products, you can sell them year-round online or in person, with very little ongoing effort after the initial setup.

Baby Animal Match

- **Product Idea:** Memory or matching card game featuring baby animals and their adult forms or habitats.
- **Design Tips:** Use high-quality photos or hand-drawn illustrations. Keep the card size standard so they can be packaged in small boxes. Consider adding fun facts on the back of each card to make it educational.
- **POD Options:** Websites like Printify or Printful can create custom playing cards and ship them directly to customers. Board Game Manufacturers or The Game Crafter also allow small-batch production.
- **Educational Value:** Players learn animal growth, species identification, and habitat awareness.

Who Eats What

- **Product Idea:** A memory or card game pairing predators with their diets. Could also be a simple matching app or digital game.
- **Design Tips:** Illustrations can be colorful and cartoon-like for kids, or realistic for an older audience. Include educational notes for each pair.
- **POD Options:** Custom card producers, or digital downloads for printable versions. Selling downloadable PDFs can be entirely hands-off once created.
- **Educational Value:** Introduces players to food chains, predator-prey relationships, and basic ecology.

Habitat Hunt

- **Product Idea:** Players sort animals into correct habitats using cards or board pieces.
- **Design Tips:** Include local and exotic species to add variety. Make habitats visually distinct.
- **POD Options:** Laminated cards or boards from Board Game Maker, or a custom card set through Printful/Printify.
- **Educational Value:** Teaches ecological diversity and habitat awareness.

Rescue or Release

- **Product Idea:** A board or card game simulating care decisions for rescued wildlife. Players choose feeding schedules, veterinary care, or release timing.
- **Design Tips:** Include scenarios based on real-life rescue challenges. Use graphics or photos of common patients. Make it cooperative to emphasize teamwork.
- **POD Options:** Game Crafter can handle small-batch production of board and card games, including boxes and instruction manuals.
- **Educational Value:** Introduces wildlife care practices, life cycles, and critical thinking about animal welfare.

Wildlife Bingo

- **Product Idea:** Bingo cards featuring animals, tracks, or facts. Can be seasonal (spring babies, migratory birds) or local wildlife-focused.
- **Design Tips:** Create printable templates or laminated cards for durability. Use images or illustrations with clear labels.
- **POD Options:** Printful, Printify, or local print shops for physical cards. Digital PDFs for direct download can reach a global audience.
- **Educational Value:** Teaches species recognition and observation skills in a fun, family-friendly format.

Track That Animal

- **Product Idea:** Players identify animals by following footprints or tracks on cards or boards. Could be packaged as a matching or memory game.
- **Design Tips:** Include real photos or high-quality illustrations of tracks and animal silhouettes. Add educational tidbits about each species.
- **POD Options:** Custom card printing or laminated educational kits. PDFs for DIY printing at home can also work.
- **Educational Value:** Promotes field observation skills and knowledge of local wildlife.

Critter Trivia

- **Product Idea:** A deck of trivia cards about wildlife, species behavior, and habitats.
- **Design Tips:** Divide cards into difficulty levels or age groups. Include fun facts and visual aids for easier engagement.
- **POD Options:** Printify or Printful for physical cards, or create digital downloads for teachers and parents.
- **Educational Value:** Expands knowledge of species and ecosystems, encourages curiosity and learning through play.

Self-Publishing for Wildlife Rehabilitators

Self-publishing used to carry a stigma. People called it vanity publishing, and many feared it meant your work wasn't "real or good." That stigma is gone. Today, self-publishing is a legitimate, professional way to get your work into readers' hands while keeping control of the process, your schedule, and the income.

There are several avenues for self-publishing. You can go through print-on-demand platforms like Amazon's KDP, IngramSpark, or Lulu. You can publish digital-only books through Amazon Kindle or Apple Books. You can even create hybrid approaches, selling both digital and print versions directly to your audience through your website.

The types of books you can create are limited only by your imagination. Memoirs or collections of stories from your wildlife work connect readers to your passion. Children's books, whether picture books or early readers, educate and entertain while highlighting wildlife conservation. Puzzle books, coloring books, and activity books provide fun, educational experiences while generating income.

Red Creek Wildlife Center has published six books so far, and this handout eventually will become our seventh. We primarily use KDP, which allows us to produce print and digital versions with minimal upfront costs. By self-publishing, we maintain creative control, keep the work aligned with our mission, and generate income that supports our wildlife care programs.

Getting Started with Self-Publishing

Once you decide to self-publish, the next step is planning. Start by deciding what type of book you want to create. Is it a memoir, a collection of short wildlife stories, a children's picture book, or a puzzle and activity book? Knowing the format early helps with layout, artwork, and word count.

Next, gather your content. For stories, organize them into chapters or sections. For children's books or activity books, create or commission illustrations, puzzles, or games. If you are using your own photography or AI-generated art, make sure the images are high resolution, at least 300 pixels per inch, and properly formatted for print or digital display. Always watermark photos if they might be used online before publication.

Editing is crucial. Even if you're confident in your writing, a fresh set of eyes or a professional editor can catch mistakes, awkward phrasing, or unclear sections. You can do this yourself, work with your team, or hire freelancers for proofreading, formatting, or cover design. There are also software programs like Grammarly that can help polish grammar, spelling, and style. For activity books, test puzzles, games, or prompts to make sure they are clear and enjoyable.

Formatting comes next. KDP, Lulu, and IngramSpark all have templates for print books. Digital-only books need to be formatted for Kindle, Apple Books, or other e-readers. Spend time checking

margins, fonts, and image placement. A well-formatted book looks professional and improves the reading experience.

Finally, marketing your book starts long before it goes live. Build anticipation on your website, email newsletter, and social media. Offer sneak peeks of illustrations, activity pages, or excerpts. Consider creating a launch event, live reading, or virtual classroom demonstration. Once published, continue to promote it with links on your website, social media posts, and mentions in newsletters or local media.

Self-publishing may sound like a lot, but it is entirely manageable if you break it into steps. The payoff is creative control, meaningful outreach, and potential passive income that directly supports your wildlife work.

Types of Books for Wildlife Rehabilitators

Memoirs and Story Collections

Your daily work is full of stories that inspire, educate, and entertain. Memoirs or collections of short stories allow you to share your experiences rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife. These books appeal to people who love animals and enjoy a personal connection to your work. You can include photos, anecdotes, and lessons learned. Self-publishing platforms like KDP make it easy to produce a print or digital version. Once published, a memoir can continue generating income year-round with little ongoing effort.

Children's Books

Wildlife stories can translate beautifully into picture books or chapter books for children. They teach empathy, biology, and conservation while engaging young readers. If you create your own illustrations or use AI-generated art, you can also repurpose the images for other products like activity sheets or POD merchandise. Children's books often have a longer shelf life because families and classrooms continually seek new material.

Puzzle and Activity Books

Activity-based books—such as word searches, mazes, matching card sets, or coloring books—combine education and fun. They can feature your wildlife photography or illustrations. Parents, educators, and wildlife enthusiasts love these products because they provide a hands-on experience. Activity books are a natural source of passive income: once designed and formatted, they can be sold digitally or through print-on-demand without ongoing production work.

Hybrid Books

Consider combining types of books. For example, a short story collection with coloring pages at the end or a children's wildlife book that doubles as an activity workbook. Hybrid books expand your audience and increase the potential for multiple sales channels.

Tips for Passive Income Success

- Invest time in high-quality images or illustrations upfront; they can be reused across multiple products.
- Proofread carefully and format professionally, either yourself or with a team or freelancer.
- Use print-on-demand or digital platforms to reduce overhead and inventory concerns.
- Build excitement and awareness with pre-launch promotion through your website, email list, and social media.

Red Creek Wildlife Center has seven published titles and more planned, including memoirs, educational guides, and activity books. Our experience shows that consistent effort during off-season months pays off with books that continue to generate revenue and engage supporters long after publication.

Teaching What You Know

Creating online, on-demand classes has truly set Red Creek apart. We were the first to develop professional-level wildlife rehabilitation courses online, long before it became common. Since then, others have followed—but we paved the way.

I want to encourage you to teach what *you* know. I'm not saying you need to teach wildlife rehabilitation (I really don't need the competition—haha), but everyone has something valuable to share. Maybe you're great at knitting, painting, gardening, or building enclosures. You can teach any skill, step-by-step, in your own voice.

If your class is information-based, make it interactive with quizzes or challenges. If it's skill-based, break it into short, manageable lessons. You can record on your phone, polish it later, and upload it to one of many learning platforms.

And if your topic doesn't fit neatly into your organization's mission, that's okay. Create it as personal income. Goodness knows, as wildlife rehabilitators, we can all use that, too.

There are many platforms where you can easily build and host your own online courses without needing a big budget or technical background.

If you want to keep full control, platforms like **Teachable**, **Thinkific**, or **Podia** let you create courses right on your own branded site. You can upload videos, add quizzes, and charge one-time or subscription fees. These platforms are user-friendly and professional, giving you complete ownership of your content and your students.

If you'd rather skip the setup work and reach an existing audience, **Udemy** and **Skillshare** are great choices. They already have large user bases searching for new classes. You'll make less per

student since they take a share, but you gain exposure to thousands of potential learners without having to market heavily yourself.

If you want to tie your teaching directly to your organization's supporters, consider using **Patreon** or a membership site. You can release short lessons, behind-the-scenes videos, or educational clips for members only.

And if you *do* want to teach wildlife rehabilitation, but don't want the hassle of publishing it yourself, I am always looking for quality content for **wildlifeedu.org**. Many rehabilitators already have one-hour classes they present at conferences. With some editing, these can easily become online courses. Of course, we would have to vet the content for accuracy and professionalism, but we are willing to pay per signup for approved courses.

No matter which route you choose, teaching what you know can bring in reliable, ongoing income. And just like our earlier examples, once the work is done, it keeps earning in the background.

Grants

Grants can feel intimidating at first, but they are simply another way of sharing your story and inviting support. Unlike donations or fundraisers, grant funding usually comes from foundations, corporations, or government programs that want to invest in your mission. The key is understanding that they're not "free money." Every grant comes with guidelines, expectations, and sometimes reports to show how the funds were used.

Grants can be powerful tools for wildlife rehabilitators. Many of us start small, running on shoestring budgets and volunteer hours. A single grant can fund a new enclosure, an X-ray machine, or even staff training that would otherwise take years to save for. It's not about luck, it's about alignment. Funders want to know that your goals match theirs, that your work has impact, and that you can deliver on what you propose.

The good news is that grants are not just for big organizations with professional writers. Small rescues win grants all the time. You already do the hard part—rescuing, treating, and releasing wildlife. Writing about it just means putting that work into words. If you can tell stories about your patients, you can write a grant proposal.

Unfortunately, the grants available for wildlife rehabilitation are not nearly as prevalent as those for domestic animal rescue, and neither comes close to what's available for human-focused causes. But there are grants out there, and there are also general grant organizations that might be willing to fund wildlife rehabilitation if they simply knew we exist.

Red Creek has been fortunate to receive some substantial grants, but that didn't happen overnight. Small, local community grants paved the way, teaching me how to approach grantors, how to inquire about inclusion, and how to write effective proposals. It was a learning process, but it can and does happen. I love the saying: What you think will or won't happen, you will be right. Your beliefs guide whether you stick with it long enough to see results.

Start by thinking small. Local community foundations, regional utility companies, and small family trusts often prefer helping local projects. They like to see their money making a visible difference close to home. Once you get the hang of the process and build a record of success, you can reach higher.

Finding Grants

Grants for wildlife rehabilitation may not be as plentiful as those for domestic animal rescue, and far fewer exist for people-focused causes. But there are opportunities if you know where to look. Start local. Community foundations, small municipal or county grant programs, and regional conservation groups often have funds set aside for education, conservation, or wildlife programs. These smaller grants are also an excellent way to learn the process and build credibility with funders.

Once you feel comfortable with local sources, expand your search to national foundations that support animal welfare, conservation, and education. A few that have supported wildlife rehabilitation or related initiatives include:

- The Disney Conservation Fund
- The Humane Society Wildlife Fund
- PetSmart Charities (occasionally supports wildlife projects)
- The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)
- State wildlife or environmental grant programs

Online tools can help you find grants, too. Websites like Grants.gov, Foundation Directory Online, and GrantWatch allow you to filter for animal-related, conservation, or educational funding opportunities.

A few tips: Keep a running list of deadlines, requirements, and contact people. Reach out to grant officers to ask if your project fits their priorities before spending time on a full proposal. And remember, each application is also a learning experience that improves your next one. Even if a grant doesn't come through, the connections you make can open doors later.

Corporate Grants and Giving Programs

Some large corporations offer grant programs for local nonprofits, including wildlife rehabilitation organizations. One notable example is Walmart. Walmart's Community Grant Program provides funds to organizations making a difference in their local communities. Grants typically range from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, and can often be applied for online.

To take advantage of these opportunities, start by visiting Walmart's corporate giving website. You can search by zip code to find local stores that participate in the program. It is often helpful to build a relationship with the local store manager or community liaison before submitting a request. They can provide guidance and sometimes even advocate for your application.

Walmart grants are often for specific projects, so be clear about how the funds will be used, whether it is for an educational program, wildlife habitat improvements, or essential supplies.

Even if your request is modest, a well-written application paired with a strong relationship with the local store can yield meaningful support.

Other corporations also provide opportunities for community-based grants or charitable giving:

- **Target**: Target's Community Giving program funds nonprofit projects at the local store level. Applications are usually accepted online and may be designated for specific initiatives such as education or community outreach.
- **Home Depot**: The Home Depot Foundation offers grants and tool donations for projects that improve community spaces. While primarily known for building and garden projects, some stores will support habitat enhancements or facility improvements for wildlife centers.
- **Lowes**: Similar to Home Depot, Lowes provides grants and material donations to community organizations. Local store managers often oversee smaller grant requests for projects within their area.
- **Bank of America**: Bank of America's charitable giving programs often support environmental and educational initiatives. They provide both grants and volunteer matching programs, which can be useful for hands-on projects at your center.

Remember, corporate grants often require clear project descriptions, budgets, and measurable outcomes. Even small grants can build credibility and experience for pursuing larger funding later. Start local, be persistent, and always follow up with a thank you and report on how the funds were used—this keeps doors open for future opportunities.

Finding Grants: Websites and Tools

Searching for grants can feel overwhelming. Many of the best grant search websites come with a hefty price tag, but they can be worth it if you know how to maximize them.

GrantStation is one of the most well-known grant search platforms. It has an extensive database of foundation, corporate, and government grants. On its own, it can be expensive for a small organization. However, nonprofits can get a significant discount through **TechSoup**, which helps nonprofit organizations access technology and services at reduced rates. At Red Creek, this has been a game-changer. The combination of GrantStation and TechSoup gave us access to resources that would otherwise be out of reach.

TechSoup is more than just a discount provider for software. They offer technology advice, educational webinars, and connections to other nonprofit resources. Membership is free, and the platform verifies your nonprofit status so you can take advantage of grants, software, and other discounts. If you are a small wildlife rehabilitation organization, this is one of the first places you should check.

A few other grant search tools to consider (these also often have subscription fees) include:

- **Foundation Directory Online** – Extensive database of foundations, searchable by location and interest area.
- **Candid** – Free and paid options. Includes helpful tools and resources for grant writing.
- **GrantWatch** – Lists available grants by state and category, often subscription-based.

While grant research can be an upfront time investment, it often pays off with funding that helps your wildlife work in ways donations alone may not.

Tips for working with grants

1. Building relationships with funders

Even small, local grants are about people as much as money. Reach out before applying. Introduce yourself and your organization. Let them know what you do and how wildlife rehabilitation fits into the community. Many grants are awarded to applicants funders feel connected to.

2. Tailoring your proposals

Not every grant is a fit. Read the requirements carefully. Tailor your language and emphasize aspects of your work that match the grant's mission. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

3. Tracking and reporting

Funders want to know their money is making an impact. Keep good records of how you spend the grant and report back promptly. Many grantors require a report on how the grant was used. Pay close attention to the requested format and the deadline. Missing a deadline or failing to submit a report can mean you will not receive a grant from that organization again. Even small, local grants appreciate a follow-up note or photo. This sets you up for future funding.

4. Start small

Before chasing large grants, practice with small local or community foundations. These teach you the process, help you build confidence, and give you successes to cite in larger applications later.

Behind every successful effort to raise funds is a team of people who make it happen. Money may keep the doors open, but volunteers keep the heart of a wildlife center alive. From caring for animals to scrubbing cages, from greeting visitors to helping with rescues, they are the ones who show up when they are needed most. Their hands and hearts are what turn plans into action.

Getting Help: Volunteers

Wildlife rehabilitation is rewarding, but it can also be overwhelming. Even the smallest centers benefit from extra hands, eyes, and hearts. Volunteers bring not just labor but energy, ideas, and community connections. They are the link between the center and the community it serves, and when supported well, they become part of the very fabric of the organization.

There is a difference between having volunteers and building a team. Having volunteers simply means people show up to help. Building a team means those people understand your mission, feel valued, and work together toward shared goals. That kind of teamwork does more than lighten the workload. It strengthens the entire organization.

The key is finding people whose skills, interests, and availability match your needs. Done well, volunteers can be a huge boost without adding stress. Done poorly, it can create frustration for both sides.

In this section, we will cover how to recruit, train, and retain volunteers, as well as tips for matching tasks to the right people and avoiding common pitfalls. Think of volunteers as part of your extended wildlife family. They can make your work smoother, more enjoyable, and more impactful.

Start with a Plan

Before bringing in new help, take time to understand what kind of help you actually need. A well-designed volunteer program starts with a clear plan. Think through each role, what it involves, and the kind of person who would thrive in it. The more structure you create before recruiting, the smoother things will run once people start showing up to help.

Many people who want to volunteer are driven by compassion and enthusiasm, but they need direction to turn that energy into something useful. Without a plan, it is easy to end up with more confusion than help. The goal is to match the right people to the right jobs, creating a system that supports both the volunteers and the animals in your care.

If you are just starting out, build your plan before advertising for volunteers. If you already have a group helping but no clear structure, it is not too late. Back up a little and design the framework with the help of those already involved. Volunteers often have valuable insight into what works well and where improvements could be made. Including them in the process creates investment and teamwork from the start.

Think about what kind of help your center truly needs. There are many ways people can contribute beyond animal care. You might need nursery volunteers during the busy season, year-round animal care staff, reception and phone coverage, capture and transport help, or assistance

with building and grounds projects. Others can focus on public education, social media, or fundraising. Some may even prefer to work from home, handling paperwork or answering phones remotely.

Once you identify the areas of need, write a short job description for each position. This does not have to be formal, but it should include a clear purpose, basic duties, the skills required, and the time commitment expected. This clarity helps you recruit more effectively, train more efficiently, and avoid misunderstandings later. It also shows potential volunteers that you value their time and effort enough to have thought things through.

A strong foundation will save you countless hours later. It will also create a program that attracts committed, capable people who stay because they feel useful, respected, and part of something that matters.

Things to Decide Before You Recruit Volunteers

Minimum Age:

Decide on the youngest age you can safely and legally accept as a volunteer. Many centers set this at sixteen or eighteen for any hands-on animal work, since younger volunteers may lack the strength, focus, or understanding to work safely around wildlife. However, younger helpers can often contribute in other ways. They might assist with cleaning, yard work, or educational projects under close supervision.

If you allow students to complete high school community service hours, decide in advance how those requests will be handled. Determine whether you can offer meaningful work within the time limits of their school program and whether you have enough staff to supervise them. Make sure the students understand that their hours are service to the animals, not a casual experience. Clear expectations at the beginning protect the animals, the students, and your staff from misunderstandings later.

Community Service Volunteers

Along with high school service hours, you may receive requests from people who need to complete community service through the legal system. Before accepting anyone, decide whether your organization is comfortable taking court-ordered volunteers. **This should be a board-level decision, not one made in the moment when someone calls asking for help.**

If you choose to allow court-ordered volunteers, establish clear written policies before you begin. Decide what types of offenses are acceptable and which are not. For example, many centers will accept minor infractions such as traffic violations, but will not take anyone convicted of violent or animal-related crimes. Make sure every applicant signs an agreement that outlines behavior expectations, supervision requirements, and consequences for noncompliance.

Treat all volunteers the same, regardless of why they are there. Everyone should receive the same orientation, training, and supervision. Consistency is not only fair but also protective. In today's litigious society, people sue over the smallest misunderstandings. Having uniform procedures and documentation for every volunteer keeps things transparent and reduces risk for your organization.

If you have tried taking community service volunteers in the past and found it did not work well, it is fine to set that boundary. For example, at Red Creek we found that court-ordered volunteers rarely completed their required hours. The time invested in orientation and supervision was seldom worth the return. Experiences like that are valuable lessons. They help you decide where to focus your limited resources and which programs truly support your mission.

If your center decides not to take legal system community service volunteers, make that clear on your website or volunteer materials. It is far easier to say no up front than to refuse someone after they have already been promised hours. Setting boundaries early keeps your volunteer program safe, fair, and professional.

Maximum Number Per Area:

Decide how many people can safely and comfortably work in each area at one time. This is especially important for smaller spaces or home-based setups where room is limited. Too many people in a small area can create confusion, block workflow, and increase stress for both animals and humans. It also raises the risk of accidents, escapes, or contamination between enclosures. Establish clear limits for each space; how many people can be in the nursery, how many in outdoor enclosures, and who is permitted in restricted areas. This prevents crowding and helps maintain a calm, efficient environment where everyone can focus on their tasks and the animals remain as undisturbed as possible.

Minimum Time Commitment and Scheduling Tips

Set a clear expectation for time. One four-hour shift each week or every other week works well for most roles. This creates continuity and reliability, which matters most during baby season. Interns will follow a different schedule and we will cover that later.

Wildlife care changes quickly. Babies grow, diets change, and treatments evolve from day to day. Volunteers who come in only once in a while often need retraining because the animals in-house are not the same as last time. Frequent retraining slows the team and increases the risk of missed details. A steady rhythm of shifts keeps volunteers current and confident.

Be clear about how long a commitment you are asking for. A three-month minimum helps with planning and reduces turnover. Explain how to handle missed shifts, and ask for notice when possible so you can cover care safely. Encourage volunteers to stick to the same day and time

each week. Familiar faces on a predictable schedule help the animals and the staff relax into a routine.

Pair new volunteers with experienced ones during the first weeks. Overlap the start or end of shifts so information passes smoothly to the next person. Keep simple written notes for each area so volunteers can see what changed since their last shift. Short updates prevent confusion and cut down on retraining.

If a volunteer cannot meet the minimum time, offer roles that do not depend on rapid clinical changes. Reception, grounds, fundraising, public education, or remote tasks allow them to contribute without constant retraining. Matching the commitment to the role protects animal welfare and respects everyone's time.

Orientation and Training Requirements

Before a volunteer begins work, decide what kind of orientation you will require. A clear, structured introduction sets the tone for safety, professionalism, and teamwork. You can choose to hold individual orientations or schedule group sessions depending on how many new volunteers you expect and what your setup allows. Group orientations often save time and help new people feel like part of a team right away, while one-on-one sessions allow more personal attention and flexibility.

Even experienced volunteers must be trained in your specific procedures. Every center has its own way of doing things, and what works in one place may not fit your setup. All volunteers should understand your safety rules, hygiene standards, and how to communicate concerns or emergencies.

At Red Creek, we hold several onboarding meetings each spring before baby season begins. Every new volunteer must attend one of these sessions and also watch our prerecorded videos on hygiene and safety. These materials give everyone a consistent foundation before they ever step into an enclosure. Setting the expectation that training is required protects both the animals and the people who care for them, and it creates a culture of preparedness from the very beginning.

Supervision

Decide early who will train and supervise your volunteers, and how you will maintain oversight without hovering over every task. Volunteers need guidance, but they also need space to gain confidence and feel trusted. The goal is to build competence while keeping a clear line of accountability.

One of the best ways to balance this is by pairing new volunteers with seasoned ones. This not only lightens your workload but also strengthens your team. Asking an experienced volunteer to help train another is a compliment and a mark of trust. It recognizes their skill and reinforces their value within the organization.

This peer-to-peer approach also builds a sense of ownership. Experienced volunteers often take pride in helping newcomers succeed, and new volunteers benefit from hands-on learning with someone who has already mastered the routines. It fosters teamwork, reduces confusion, and keeps the entire operation running smoothly while allowing you to focus on the bigger picture.

Volunteer Access and Restricted Areas

Clearly define which areas are open to volunteers and which are restricted to staff or authorized personnel only. This is essential for safety, confidentiality, and the smooth operation of your center. Medical and quarantine spaces should always be off-limits unless a trained staff member is present. These areas often contain animals that are fragile, contagious, or under special treatment, and limiting access protects both the animals and the volunteers.

For home-based rehabilitators, boundaries are even more important. You are inviting people into your personal space, and it is vital to separate work areas from private living areas. Make it clear where volunteers can and cannot go. A simple closed door, a sign, or a polite verbal reminder can prevent uncomfortable situations before they occur. Establishing these limits early protects your privacy and keeps everyone focused on their tasks.

Decide who will have access to your facility and how that access will be managed. Some centers keep doors locked at all times and require volunteers to be let in, while others provide access codes or keys to trusted individuals. At Red Creek, we use electronic keypad locks on exterior doors. Good-quality locks, such as those made by Schlage or Kwikset, allow multiple users to have their own unique codes. When a volunteer leaves or access needs to be revoked, you simply delete their code. This eliminates the constant need to change locks or collect keys, and it prevents problems that arise when someone makes a copy of a key without permission.

Access control is about more than convenience. It ensures animal security, volunteer safety, and peace of mind for the staff. It also sends a clear message that the facility is a professional space where procedures and privacy are respected. Whether your operation is large or home-based, taking time to plan who has access, when, and how is an important step toward keeping your environment safe and well-managed.

Scheduling and Reliability:

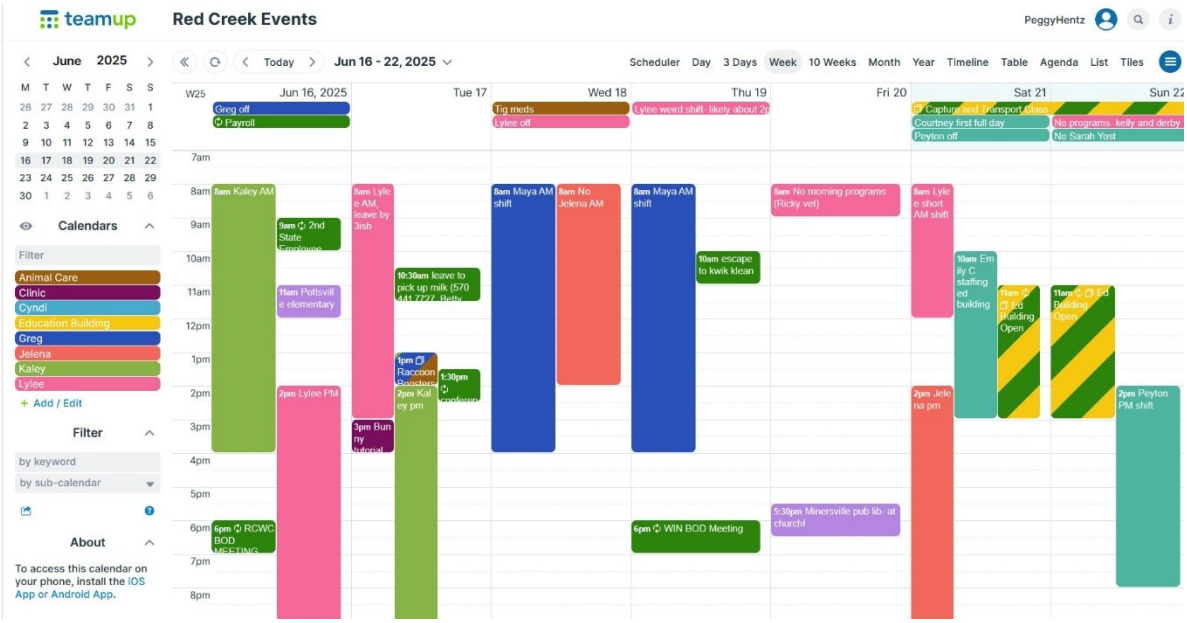
Decide how scheduling will be handled, who keeps the calendar, and how cancellations should be communicated.

When you are choosing an online scheduling tool, start by being clear about your roles and shifts. You are already developing this part, and it is the most important step. Know how many volunteers you need, what each shift involves, and how many people can safely work at once. Having this clarity first helps you pick a system that truly fits the way your program runs rather than forcing your work into someone else's format.

Keep in mind that your volunteers will have different levels of comfort with technology. Choose something simple to use, with an easy login, a clear layout, and a mobile-friendly design. The less complicated it is, the more likely your volunteers will actually use it.

Look for a tool that allows both a shared calendar view and individual scheduling. Staff should be able to see everything at a glance, while volunteers can sign up or be assigned to specific shifts. This prevents double booking and keeps everyone on the same page.

You may also want to control who can see and access certain areas of the schedule. For example, animal care or medical areas might be limited to trained volunteers only. Some tools allow you to manage this through permissions or separate links, which can be very helpful.



Reminders and notifications are another valuable feature. Automated messages reduce the chance of no-shows and help everyone remember their commitments without adding to your workload.

Many scheduling tools offer free versions, which can be perfect for small operations. Calendly, YouCanBookMe, and Zoho Bookings each have free tiers that are often enough to start. Just review any limits on the number of users or features so you are not surprised later.

Finally, if you have a website, check whether the calendar can be embedded directly into it. Since your organization already uses WordPress, this can make scheduling easy for everyone. Volunteers can check available shifts and sign up right from your site, keeping all your communication and scheduling in one familiar place.

Tool	Free Tier & Cost	Key Features	Fit for Wildlife Rehab Volunteer Program
Teamup	Free plan: up to 8 sub-calendars, many features with shareable links. (Teamup.com)	Volunteer shift calendars, availability grids, shareable links, iCal feeds, embed/WordPress friendly.	Strong fit for shift scheduling across many roles (nursery, grounds, reception) and embed on your WordPress site.
SignUp.com	Free version available. (SignUp.com)	Online sign-up sheets, volunteers select shifts, e-calendar sync, reminders.	Good for letting volunteers self-sign for open slots; simpler role types.
SuperSaaS	Free plan available (with limits); paid starts ~$9/month. (SuperSaaS)	Self-booking, capacity limits for each slot, recurring sessions, availability matching.	Useful if you have many shift types and need volunteers to book themselves; good for your varied roles.
Zelos Team Management	“Forever free” standard subscription for nonprofits; unlimited volunteers. (Zelos Team Management)	Volunteer onboarding, shift scheduling, basic management; free tier generous.	Good option if you want more than just scheduling (onboarding/tracking) and stay on a tight budget.
Shift	Free trial, then ~$39/month; unlimited volunteers. (VolunteerShift)	Self-schedule, post shifts, track hours, good dashboard.	Might be more budget than you want initially; consider once your program grows.

My Recommendation

Start with **Teamup**: (It's the one Red Creek uses.) It gives you broad functionality for free, can be embedded in your WordPress site (which you are already using), and supports volunteer shift scheduling across many roles.

Use **SignUp.com** in parallel if you want a simpler self-signup interface for some roles (like public education or reception) where volunteers might prefer to pick times themselves.

As your program expands, evaluate **Zelos** or upgrade SuperSaaS/Shift when you need more advanced tracking (onboarding, hours logging, reports).

Implementation Tips

Set up your master calendar in Teamup with sub-calendars for each major role you defined earlier (animal care year-round, seasonal, nursery, reception, transport, remote, etc).

Embed the calendar or a link on your volunteer page of your WordPress site so volunteers can view shift availability.

Make sure volunteers have clear instructions on how to view and sign up for shifts (or how they will be assigned) and set expectations about time commitment and boundaries (you've already defined those).

Use reminders (via the tool) to reduce no-shows.

Monitor how many volunteers sign up, how full your shifts are, and whether you need to adjust roles or scheduling blocks.

Dress Code and Safety Rules

Set clear dress code standards before volunteers begin working. Proper clothing prevents injuries and helps maintain a professional environment. Require closed shoes in all work areas, and specify clothing that is sturdy, washable, and fitted enough to avoid snagging on cages or equipment.

Remind volunteers to keep hair tied back and to avoid loose clothing or accessories that could become entangled. Jewelry should be removed before handling animals. Rings, necklaces, and bracelets can scratch, catch, or break, and facial jewelry can be especially dangerous. Some animals, such as crows and other corvids, are drawn to shiny objects and may strike at piercings or earrings.

When you set these expectations early and explain why they matter, volunteers are far more likely to comply. A simple written policy, reviewed during orientation, keeps everyone safe and consistent.

Cell Phone and Photo Policy

Set a clear and simple cell phone policy before volunteers begin work. Phones are a common source of distraction and contamination in animal care areas. They collect bacteria and residue from everyday use, and bringing them into animal spaces increases the risk of spreading germs.

Phones can also be noisy and unsettling. Rings, alerts, and even vibrations can startle wildlife, especially young or recovering animals. Keeping phones put away helps maintain a calm, focused environment.

Along with a phone policy, draft a photo policy right away. Publishing unauthorized photos can make your organization appear unprofessional and may even violate permit regulations. Selfies or casual photos with animals can give the public the wrong impression, suggesting that wildlife are safe to handle or can make good pets. Every image shared reflects on your professionalism and the public's understanding of what you do, so control over photos is essential.

Another benefit of limiting phone access is reducing random or impulsive picture taking. Establishing clear rules about when and how photos can be taken prevents problems before they start.

Designate a specific area for phone storage, such as lockers, cubbies, or a charging station away from animal areas. Encourage volunteers to check their phones only during breaks. A clear and consistent policy helps maintain privacy, protects the animals, and reinforces a professional image for your organization.

Insurance and Liability

Before allowing anyone to volunteer, confirm that your organization's insurance covers volunteer activities. This protects both you and the people who work with you. Not all policies automatically include volunteers, and many homeowner policies specifically exclude them. Never assume you are covered—verify it in writing with your insurance provider.

Every volunteer should sign a liability waiver before beginning any work. This form should clearly state the risks involved in working with wildlife and acknowledge that the volunteer accepts those risks. A photo release form is also useful, allowing you to use pictures taken during programs or events for education and outreach.

At Red Creek, we use the Charles Baker Insurance Company, which specializes in wildlife rehabilitation coverage. Companies familiar with our field understand the unique risks and can tailor policies to meet your needs. Taking the time to secure proper coverage protects your organization, your volunteers, and your mission.

Conflict and Dismissal Policy

Even in the best-run programs, conflicts and difficult situations will arise. Having a clear and respectful process in place prevents misunderstandings and protects everyone involved. Decide ahead of time how complaints or concerns will be handled, who will mediate them, and what steps will be taken if a volunteer fails to meet expectations.

There are certain issues that should never be negotiable. At Red Creek, we have zero tolerance for ignoring safety systems such as double-door caging, failing to use required protective equipment, or posting photos without permission. These actions compromise safety, privacy, and professionalism. Identify your own non-negotiable rules early and make them known to every volunteer during orientation.

Set your standards high and review them from time to time. A consistent, well-documented policy keeps small problems from becoming major ones. It also reinforces that your organization values safety, respect, and integrity above convenience. Volunteers who understand the boundaries are more likely to take their role seriously and feel confident in the professionalism of your operation.

Creating Job Descriptions

Creating clear job descriptions for every volunteer position sets the foundation for a strong, organized program. They do not need to be long or formal, but they should outline what the role includes, what skills are needed, and what the expectations are. A simple written description helps avoid confusion, supports consistency in training, and gives volunteers confidence in knowing exactly what is expected of them.

Job descriptions also make recruiting easier. They allow potential volunteers to see where they might fit best, and they prevent mismatches that can lead to frustration. Even a brief outline helps staff and volunteers stay aligned. Review these descriptions occasionally and update them as your center grows or procedures change.

Here is a sample job description that could be adapted to your own program:

Sample Job Description: Weekly Animal Care Volunteer

Assist with the daily care of wildlife patients by providing clean enclosures, fresh food and water, and a safe, calm environment.

Duties and Responsibilities:

- Clean and disinfect cages, dishes, and equipment
- Prepare and distribute diets according to staff instructions
- Restock supplies and assist with laundry and general cleaning
- Observe animals and report any changes in behavior, health, or enclosure conditions to staff
- Follow all safety and hygiene protocols, including use of PPE and proper handling techniques

Schedule and Time Commitment:
One four-hour shift each week, preferably on a consistent day and time. Volunteers should commit to a minimum of three months whenever possible.

Qualifications:

- Must be at least 18 years old (or 16 with supervision, depending on facility policy)
- Comfortable working around animals and cleaning materials
- Able to follow detailed instructions and work independently once trained
- Willingness to perform routine cleaning tasks with attention to detail

Training Provided:
All volunteers will receive orientation and training in safety, hygiene, and animal handling appropriate to their assigned duties.

Supervision:
Reports to the Animal Care Coordinator or designated staff member on duty.

Sample Job Description: Reception and Phone Volunteer

Serve as the first point of contact for the public by answering phone calls, greeting visitors, and assisting with basic administrative tasks. This role helps ensure that calls are handled efficiently and that the public receives accurate information about wildlife situations and Red Creek's programs.

Duties and Responsibilities:

- Answer incoming calls and provide calm, informed guidance to the public on wildlife concerns
- Record detailed messages and transfer calls or information to the appropriate staff member
- Greet visitors, provide information about the organization, and maintain a welcoming atmosphere
- Assist with clerical tasks such as filing, labeling, and preparing mailings
- Support staff during busy periods, especially during baby season

Schedule and Time Commitment:

One four-hour shift per week, ideally at a consistent time. A three-month commitment is preferred.

Qualifications:

- Strong communication skills and a calm, patient manner when speaking with the public
- Ability to follow intake protocols and handle emotional or urgent calls professionally
- Basic computer and phone system skills
- Comfort working in an environment where animals may be visible or audible
- Minimum age of 18, or 16 with supervision, depending on facility policy

Training Provided:

All volunteers receive an orientation and specific phone training, including Red Creek's wildlife call scripts and referral lists. Volunteers are supported by experienced staff until they feel confident handling calls independently.

Supervision:
Reports to the Office Coordinator or designated staff member on duty.

Recruiting Volunteers

At Red Creek, we discovered early on that volunteer recruitment works best when it happens *through our site only*. Directing all applicants through our official volunteer page sets the tone immediately: this is a professional position, not a casual visit. It is also completely different from volunteering with domestic animal rescues. Potential volunteers who take the time to review our requirements and apply via the formal process are far more likely to be committed, reliable, and understand our mission.

Our recruitment page does more than collect names. It introduces applicants to the realities of wildlife rehabilitation: physical demands, biosecurity protocols, and the mindset needed to work with wild animals. Because new volunteers arrive already knowing what is expected, we spend less time filtering and more time training and integrating solid team members.

In the following section, we'll explore how to attract the right people, screen effectively, and match their skills to your organization's needs. By following a process you've thoughtfully designed, you'll build a volunteer team that supports, not burdens, your mission.

Screening and Selection

Recruiting the right people begins with a clear, intentional screening process. The goal is not to make it difficult to volunteer but to make sure those who apply understand what they are stepping into. Wildlife rehabilitation is demanding work, and thoughtful screening protects both the animals and the volunteers themselves.

At Red Creek, every applicant begins by reading through information on our website about what it means to work in wildlife rehabilitation. This first step filters out people who are simply curious about seeing the animals. By the time they reach the application, they already understand that the work is hands-on, often messy, and always serious.

An online application allows you to gather important details while maintaining professionalism. Ask questions that reveal motivation and availability, such as why they want to volunteer, what skills they bring, and whether they are comfortable cleaning, feeding, or working outdoors in all weather. Including a few open-ended questions gives you insight into how the applicant thinks and communicates.

Insist that references be professional or education-related. No family and friends here. Teachers, coworkers, bosses, and managers are more reliable than boyfriends and housemates.

Whenever possible, review applications before contacting potential volunteers. Follow up with a short interview by phone or in person. This step helps confirm that the applicant's expectations match the reality of the work. It also gives you a chance to explain your structure and commitment requirements in a conversational way.

Do not skip background checks. They are a simple but essential layer of protection, especially for organizations that work with the public or house valuable equipment and wildlife.

The goal is to build a team of reliable, thoughtful people who are there for the right reasons. When screening is done well, you spend less time managing issues and more time building a strong, lasting volunteer program.

Application questions

Red Creek's application also helps identify potential issues early—concerns that are both common and unique to wildlife rehabilitation. Each question is designed to emphasize the seriousness of having the right mindset for this work. Every question includes a short explanation, and applicants must respond with Yes, No, or Not Sure. This approach ensures that new volunteers understand expectations before they ever step through the door.

The goal of wildlife rehabilitation is to release the animals back into the wild. Because of this, it is imperative that the animals remain wild and do not become habituated to people, including staff. Wildlife rehabilitation is a hands-off type of animal work and a professional distance must be maintained at all times.

Question: Can I refrain from touching, holding and comforting an animal, even a cute baby animal?

Working in animal care at Red Creek Wildlife Center requires bending, kneeling and carrying buckets of water up to 30 pounds. Cages are cleaned and disinfected with simple green cleaner, dawn dishwashing liquid, bleach and nolvasan.

Question: Can I meet the physical requirements of volunteering? Can I work around these chemicals?

Red Creek accepts all species of Pennsylvania wildlife except bear and adult deer. This includes animals often thought of as undesirable such as starlings, snakes, skunks, raccoons and coyotes.

Question: Can I give good care to animals that I find undesirable, smelly or ugly?

Many animals presented for rehabilitation are carnivores. This means there will be dead animals that will be fed to carnivores. Red Creek has freezers of frozen mice, rats, hamsters, guinea pigs and baby chickens that are used for food. Most of these are thawed and fed whole, but occasionally it is necessary to process them prior to feeding (sectioning with scissors or skinning).

NOTE: WE DO NOT SACRIFICE PATIENTS AS FOOD FOR OTHER ANIMALS!

Question: Am I comfortable with the idea that animals are fed to other animals?

Question: Can I prepare and process these to feed to the other animals.

Red Creek receives over 4,000 animals each year. Many of these animals come to us suffering severe injuries or illness. Some might not reach a level of health needed for release. These animals cannot be warehoused and the rehabilitator on duty may make the decision to euthanize the animal.

Please note: Volunteers and interns will never be asked to euthanize an animal.

Question: Can I remain emotionally distant and accept that euthanasia is a necessary and compassionate part of rehabilitation? Can I refrain from crying, begging, judging or becoming hostile with the rehabilitator?

Spotting Red Flags Early

An interview tells you much more than what a person says on paper. It is your chance to get a feel for their attitude, their comfort level, and their understanding of what wildlife rehabilitation really involves. You want to give everyone a fair chance, but you also need to recognize warning signs before they become problems.

One of the first red flags is motivation that comes from curiosity rather than service. When someone says they "just want to see the animals" or asks, "Do you have opossums? I've always loved opossums," they are often looking for an experience, not a responsibility. The same goes for questions about holding, feeding, or taking photos before asking about training or safety. These are kind people, often with good hearts, but their focus is misplaced. It is better to steer them toward education programs or public events than bring them into animal care.

Another warning sign is discomfort with the realities of the work. If a candidate hesitates or jokes nervously when you mention cleaning cages, handling deceased animals, or working with insects, they may not be ready for what this job demands. Wildlife care is hands-on, messy, and sometimes sad. Volunteers who can face that with calm acceptance will last much longer and do more good.

Overconfidence can also cause problems. When someone insists they already know how to handle animals or that they "do things their own way," it suggests they may not adapt to your procedures. Every facility has its own protocols designed for the safety of both animals and people. A person who questions rules during the interview, whether about protective gear, release procedures, or restricted areas, may resist direction later on.

Listen closely for negative talk about previous volunteer experiences. Applicants who blame other organizations for "bad management" or "too many rules" often bring that same energy with them. It is reasonable for someone to describe what they learned or what they hope will be different, but constant criticism is a sign of future conflict. For anyone who has volunteered elsewhere, take the time to call that organization for a reference. A five-minute conversation can save you weeks of frustration later.

At Red Creek, an orientation also includes a tour. People who have a healthy "stand back" respect for the animals often do very well.

On the other hand, some concerns show up not as words but as behavior. A person who tries to get close to an animal or starts baby talking to it needs gentle correction right away. This kind of interaction can harm rehabilitation efforts by making the animal more comfortable with humans. If the person understands, steps back respectfully, and changes their behavior, they may still become a valuable volunteer. If you need to remind them several times, they often do not work out. Awareness and respect for wildness are qualities that cannot be taught easily, and they are at the heart of every good volunteer relationship.

These early red flags do not mean a person is bad or unkind. They simply show that the fit is not right. Recognizing that during the interview allows you to keep your program positive, focused, and built around people who truly share your mission.

Red Creek Internship Program

Interns bring an energy and focus that can transform a wildlife rehabilitation center. Their commitment is often tied to school requirements, which gives them a built-in sense of accountability. Most come to us with specific career goals in mind, whether that is veterinary medicine, zoology, wildlife biology, game management, or environmental education. Because their personal ambitions align so closely with our mission, they arrive motivated to learn and ready to work hard.

At Red Creek, we believe internships are more than just extra hands. They are a professional stepping stone into the field of wildlife rehabilitation. We have built our program to be selective, authentic, and meaningful from the very beginning. The students who join us are not only helping our animals but also preparing for their own careers in wildlife care and conservation.

Our internship program offers benefits that few others can match. Interns receive a full learning experience that combines online training, live classes, and hands-on animal care. Many centers limit interns to cleaning and basic chores, but we rely on them for real, essential work. Interns feed baby animals, monitor growth and recovery, and take part in caring for the thousand or more wild patients that pass through our doors each year. They are a vital part of our team, and because they give so much, we make sure they gain something valuable in return—genuine experience, strong mentorship, and a deep understanding of what it means to work in this field.

Each year we typically receive around twenty summer applications and accept about fifteen into the program. These are serious, structured placements, not casual volunteer spots. In addition, we host two or three interns in the fall or spring seasons, which are more flexible and allow students to balance coursework with hands-on experience.

Level 1 Internship

The Level 1 internship at Red Creek Wildlife Center, Inc. is designed to give serious students and aspiring wildlife professionals meaningful experience. This is a volunteer (unpaid) position that runs from May through August. Although the start and end dates are slightly flexible to accommodate different college schedules, interns must commit to one daytime shift and one evening shift each week, plus one weekend shift each month, for a consecutive 13-week block.

In addition to hands-on animal care, interns take part in classroom training and live instruction.

Learning Opportunities:

- Knowledge of the missions of Red Creek Wildlife Center, Inc. and how our missions fit in with the larger picture of wildlife conservation and protection of public health.
- Knowledge of the regulations and laws associated with wildlife rehabilitation.
- Exposure to the operations of a wildlife rehabilitation center.
- Learn how to properly care for rehabilitation animals.
- How to deal with the public during stressful wildlife situations
- How to feed baby wild animals
- How to restrain birds of prey for treatment and exams
- How to administer fluids to birds and mammals
- How to complete a physical exam
- How to identify Pennsylvania mammals and raptors and categorize non-raptor avian species
- How to determine proper dosing for medications and fluids
- Interns will also be exposed to learning about various diseases, nutritional information, and understanding zoological milk formulas.

Level 1 Internship Duties

Interns will be responsible for:

- Cleaning enclosures and caging, which may include raking, sweeping, and scrubbing.
- Feeding and watering animals
- Cleaning of the clinic and treatment areas.
- Washing and disinfecting food and water bowls and caging.
- Maintaining charts
- Assisting staff with medical treatment and examinations of animals.
- Identify potential health issues in animals and report these to staff.
- Assist with intakes of new rehabilitation patients from the public, including imputing information into a database.
- Assist with handling and enrichment for the education and foster animals.
- Plus, any additional chores needed to maintain animals and facilities
- In addition, interns will be expected to attend all classroom training (4 sessions per summer)
- Interns might be able to acquire rabies vaccinations through rabies clinics at various rehabilitation centers (when available).

Level 2 Internship

The Level 2 Internship at Red Creek is a paid position that offers an advanced learning opportunity for students who have already completed a Level 1 internship within the past two years. Space is limited, and only two students are selected each summer. This internship is a true working position, not a stipend or volunteer arrangement. Level 2 interns are W-2 employees who meet all federal, state, and local tax requirements. The pay rate is minimum wage for thirty to forty hours each week.

This internship requires a full thirteen-week commitment, completed consecutively. Interns must be available for both daytime and evening shifts, with some evenings extending to 11 p.m. depending on the number of young animals needing care. Reliability is essential. Wildlife work does not follow a clock, and our patients always come first. Travel and accommodations are not included, so interns should plan accordingly.

The Level 2 program builds on the foundation of Level 1, adding both independence and responsibility. Students move from learning the basics of care to helping oversee others. This position provides experience in managing volunteers and Level 1 interns while still working hands-on with the animals.

Learning Opportunities

- Gain experience working independently in a wildlife rehabilitation clinic
- Supervise Level 1 interns and volunteers under staff guidance
- Strengthen understanding of medical routines and daily clinic operations

Level 2 Internship Duties

- Feeding baby animals according to the schedule established by staff and supervising volunteers during feeding times
- Administering evening medications
- Answering phones and communicating professionally with the public
- Admitting new patient intakes and recording accurate information
- Contacting staff-on-call for new patients or emergency care situations
- Cleaning dishes, organizing rooms, and removing garbage at the end of each shift
- Completing all closing procedures before leaving for the night

The Level 2 Internship at Red Creek is designed for serious students preparing for careers in animal-related fields. It provides a true sense of what it means to work in wildlife rehabilitation—dedication, precision, and teamwork. Interns leave the program with stronger skills, deeper confidence, and a real-world understanding of the responsibilities that come with caring for wild lives.

How to Attract Interns

Finding good interns begins with putting your program where the right students can see it. Start by reaching out directly to the colleges within a one- to two-hour drive of your facility. Look beyond just the biology departments. Contact programs in veterinary science, pre-vet, zoology, ecology, wildlife management, conservation biology, and environmental education. Departments of animal behavior, natural resources, and even communications or education can also produce students who want hands-on wildlife experience. Send a letter or email that introduces your center and describes your internship in a way that highlights what the student will *gain*, not just what they will *do.*

Describe the experience as a professional opportunity. List the specific skills students will learn—animal husbandry, teamwork, field protocols, data collection, biosecurity, and the realities of working in a licensed rehabilitation center. These are the things that catch the attention of professors and career counselors, and they are exactly what students need to build a resume that stands out.

Once you start attracting applicants from certain schools, build relationships with those departments. Learn the professors' names and stay in touch with them. Let them know how their students performed. Send a thank-you email when one of their students completes a successful internship. Professors remember that kind of professionalism, and they will continue to send you motivated, capable students year after year.

Another way to reach students is through **Handshake.com**, a site used by colleges and universities for posting internship and job opportunities. Handshake's Basic Plan is free for employers and allows you to post listings (including unpaid internships) and access some search tools. It has limitations on the number of messages and matches you can use, but for a small organization with limited hiring needs, it works very well.

Your website can also bring strong applicants your way. Make sure your internship pages use clear search terms such as "wildlife rehabilitation internship," "animal care internship," or "internships with wildlife." These keywords help students find your program when they search online. Include professional photos of interns working, descriptions of what they will learn, and testimonials if possible. The more your site looks professional and informative, the more it appeals to serious students.

Local connections can also help. Post internship listings on community college boards, nature centers, and local environmental organizations. Many students who live nearby are looking for meaningful summer experience without having to travel or pay for housing.

You can even connect with high school guidance counselors at schools that offer career pathways in environmental science or veterinary technology. While most of your interns will be college-

level students, these contacts can create a pipeline of future applicants who already know about your program before they ever reach college.

Attracting good interns takes a little effort at first, but once your program proves itself, word of mouth becomes your best recruiter. Former interns will talk about their experience and encourage others to apply. That reputation, built on professionalism and real learning, keeps a steady stream of capable students walking through your doors each year.

At Red Creek, we use all of these methods, but our best results come from word of mouth. Former interns often recommend the program to other students, and professors who have had their students intern with us frequently send new applicants our way. Search engines that lead students to our website also bring steady interest, and an occasional notice on Facebook helps reach local students looking for meaningful experience close to home.

At Red Creek, we use all of these techniques. We have the best results from word of mouth from student to student from past interns, referrals from professors who had some of our students intern for us, and through search engines that bring students to our website. A notice on Facebook also brings in some applicants.

The Benefits of Internships

A well-structured internship program is a true win for everyone involved. The students gain valuable hands-on experience that strengthens their education and prepares them for careers in wildlife, veterinary medicine, and conservation. The center benefits from having dedicated, motivated individuals who bring energy and fresh perspective to the daily work. Most importantly, the animals win. With more trained and committed help, they receive faster care, better attention, and a greater chance at recovery and release. When an internship program is built with purpose and mutual respect, it becomes a partnership where everyone learns, everyone grows, and every wild life has a better chance.

Training and Teaching

Good training begins with structure, clarity, and consistency. It is not only important for the volunteers but essential for the animals. Volunteers need to know what they are doing, how long it takes, and what is expected of them. Ambiguity breeds frustration and wastes time. At the same time, throwing someone into the middle of baby season or a complex medical case on their first day is asking for chaos. Start small, build confidence, and let experience grow naturally.

Teaching what you know is one of the greatest responsibilities of a professional rehabilitator. I have seen rehabbers guard their knowledge like a secret recipe, afraid someone will take their place or do it better. That mindset hurts the animals most of all. Volunteers come in eager to learn, and when they are trusted with knowledge, they become more capable and more invested in the mission. Wildlife rehabilitation is not a competition. Share what you know freely. The more trained hands we have in this field, the better it is for every wild creature that comes through our doors.

Let volunteers learn by doing, but guide them with patience. No one is perfect, and mistakes will happen. Volunteers are here because they care, not because they are professionals. Offer correction calmly and explain why a procedure matters. Every small success builds skill and confidence, and every mistake is a chance to teach, but teach gently.

Written protocols make training smoother and safer. Standard operating procedures do not have to be long, complicated manuals that sit forgotten in a drawer. They should exist in your files, but they work best as clear, easy-to-read reminders placed right where they are needed. Recipes belong in the kitchen. Medication charts belong in the treatment area. Quick reference signs help volunteers make the right decisions even when no one is standing beside them.

Labels are another quiet but powerful training tool. If you have ever tried to help someone in their kitchen, you know how confusing it is to figure out where things go. Volunteers face that same confusion every day. Labels on drawers, bins, and shelves make it easy to find what they need and to return it to the right place. It saves time, reduces frustration, and keeps the work area organized for everyone.

As you teach, watch for individual strengths. Some volunteers are natural organizers, others are calm with animals, and some thrive in public interaction. Matching tasks to a person's talent keeps them engaged and helps the whole team function better. When training is done well, everyone benefits—the volunteers, the staff, and most of all, the animals.

Trust and Teamwork

A successful volunteer program is built on trust. You can have all the structure and organization in the world, but without trust, your team will never truly function as one. The goal is to turn a group of helpers into a dependable team, one that works together smoothly even when things

get hectic. That kind of teamwork does not happen by accident. It grows through consistent communication, clear expectations, and mutual respect.

Each volunteer brings their own strengths. Some are natural problem-solvers, others are meticulous cleaners, and a few can calm even the most frightened animal with their gentle manner. Part of leadership is recognizing those strengths and putting them to good use. When people are assigned tasks that suit them, they perform better and enjoy the work more. You can see the difference in how they show up, how they talk about the animals, and how they help others.

Give volunteers ownership of specific responsibilities whenever possible. Let someone be in charge of keeping the nursery stocked, another to oversee laundry, or someone else to track food prep supplies. These small pieces of responsibility give people a sense of purpose and belonging. When they know their contribution matters, they take pride in their work and look for ways to do it even better.

Keep communication open and honest. Volunteers should feel comfortable sharing when they are tired, confused, or struggling with a task. Hidden frustration can lead to burnout or resentment that spreads quickly through a team. Encourage people to ask questions and to admit when they make a mistake. A calm and supportive tone goes a long way in keeping morale high.

Appreciation ties it all together. People rarely volunteer for recognition, but they do need to feel valued. A simple thank you, a kind word at the end of a shift, or a public acknowledgment during a meeting can mean more than you realize. Feedback is just as important. Let volunteers know when they are doing something right, and offer guidance when they can improve. Constructive, respectful communication builds confidence and loyalty.

When trust, teamwork, and appreciation are part of the daily rhythm, your volunteers stop being just helpers. They become partners in your mission, people you can rely on through the busiest days and the hardest seasons.

Boundaries and Professionalism

Strong leadership is not about control. It is about guidance, consistency, and calm authority. Maintaining professionalism in a volunteer setting means leading with confidence while remaining approachable. Volunteers should see you as someone they can turn to for direction, not someone they need to avoid. When leadership feels steady and fair, people are more willing to follow your lead, even when the rules are strict or the work is demanding.

Boundaries are there to protect everyone—animals, staff, and volunteers alike. Clear limits prevent misunderstandings and help maintain safety and professionalism. If a task is off-limits to volunteers, say so plainly. If an area is restricted, explain why. People respect rules they understand. Boundaries also protect you as a leader. When expectations are clear, you are not

put in the position of constantly saying no or fixing problems that could have been avoided with better communication.

Every group will have a mix of personalities. Most volunteers are kind and cooperative, but occasionally you will encounter someone who challenges authority or disrupts the flow. Handling those situations with respect is important. Listen to their concerns, stay calm, and focus on the facts. Sometimes people simply need to feel heard. Other times, they may not be a good fit for your organization. You can be firm without being harsh. The goal is always to protect the animals and the team, not to win an argument.

There will be times when it is best for a volunteer to move on. This can be uncomfortable, but it is part of maintaining professionalism. When a person continually resists direction, ignores safety rules, or causes conflict among others, the entire team suffers. Ending that relationship protects the health of your program and the well-being of everyone involved. It is never easy, but it is necessary.

Professionalism in wildlife rehabilitation does not mean being distant or cold. It means being clear, fair, and consistent. Volunteers who understand boundaries feel safer, trust leadership more, and work better together. In the end, strong boundaries create an environment where people thrive, animals are well cared for, and your mission moves forward with integrity.

Letting Someone Go

Letting a volunteer go is one of the hardest parts of running a wildlife center. Most people who come to help truly care, but sometimes a situation reaches a point where it no longer works. Having a plan for how to handle it keeps the process fair and professional.

When problems arise, start by documenting what happened. Keep a few notes so you can remember details clearly. This helps you stay objective and prevents emotions from clouding your judgment.

Talk to the volunteer privately as soon as you notice a problem. Never correct or confront someone in front of others. Public embarrassment creates tension and divides the team. A quiet conversation away from the group allows you to address the issue calmly and respectfully.

Many problems can be fixed with an honest talk. Sometimes people do not realize how their actions affect others. If the situation is not dangerous, explain what needs to change and give them a fair chance to improve. Be specific about expectations and check in later to see if things have gotten better.

If the behavior continues or if safety is ever at risk, you may need to end the relationship. When that time comes, do it with kindness but be firm. Focus on facts, not feelings. You can thank the person for the time they gave while still making it clear that their service is ending. Never discuss the decision with other volunteers. Gossip destroys trust faster than any mistake ever could.

Collect keys, access codes, or anything that allows entry to the property, and make sure everyone involved understands the decision is final. The conversation will not be easy, but it is sometimes necessary to protect the animals, the team, and the overall mission.

Good leadership is not about avoiding difficult moments—it is about handling them with integrity. When you part ways with respect and clarity, the rest of your team will see that your decisions are fair and rooted in care for everyone involved.

Volunteer Retention and Appreciation

Keeping good volunteers is about more than organization or scheduling. It is about creating connection and belonging. People stay where they feel useful, respected, and appreciated. When you build that kind of environment, your volunteers will stand by you through the busiest season and even through the hardest times.

At Red Creek, we call our volunteers and staff the “Red Creek Family.” It truly feels like family. That bond did not happen by accident. We built it through mutual respect, gratitude, and teamwork. We make a point to thank people often and to let them know their work matters. Just as important, we protect that sense of unity by not allowing tension or negativity to take root. We do not allow gossip or cliques to form. When someone repeatedly causes conflict, we address it directly, and if it cannot be resolved, we let that person go.

That approach was tested when Red Creek faced one of its darkest moments—a tragic fire that changed everything. In that moment, I saw the power of what we had built. Our volunteers and staff stood together. They comforted each other, grieved together, and rebuilt side by side. It reminded me that a true team is more than a collection of helpers. It is a group of people who share a purpose, care deeply for one another, and show up no matter how hard things get.

Creating that kind of culture takes effort and consistency, but it pays back tenfold. A team that feels respected and supported will stay loyal and give their best every day. They will carry your mission in their hearts. And when the time comes to grow beyond volunteers and add paid staff, that same foundation of respect and teamwork will carry you forward into the next chapter.

From Avocation to a Vocation

Wildlife rehabilitation often begins as a calling. We start with a deep love for animals, a drive to help, and little thought about the business side of the work. It feels personal and meaningful, but passion alone cannot sustain an organization. What begins as an avocation, a heartfelt pursuit, must eventually become a vocation if it is to survive.

Most rehabilitators believe paying employees is beyond their reach. It is not. With planning and the right mindset, it can be done. In many cases, the first paid position should be the rehabilitator themselves. Yet many hesitate to take that step. Some worry that paying themselves will look selfish, while others fear that donors or the community will not understand. But paying a professional for professional work does not diminish integrity. It reinforces the idea that wildlife rehabilitation is skilled, demanding, and worthy of financial support.

Every rehabilitator should budget, at least on paper, for their own pay and for one full-time assistant. Even if the funds are not available yet, including these positions in the budget creates a goal and helps the organization grow with intention. Paid staff bring consistency to animal care, reliability to the daily work, and allow time for rest that prevents burnout. Passion alone cannot keep the doors open. People need to be paid if the work is to continue.

Becoming an employer can feel intimidating, but it is a necessary step toward professionalism. Staff must be treated as employees, not helpers paid under the table or with stipends. Paying people off the books might seem easier at first, but it creates serious risks for both you and your organization. It can lead to tax trouble, fines, and loss of nonprofit credibility. More importantly, it leaves workers unprotected if something goes wrong.

Wildlife rehabilitation involves risk. There are bites, scratches, lifting injuries, and countless hazards. If someone is hurt while working for you, they need to be covered. Employees must be paid as W-2 workers with proper deductions for taxes, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation. This protects both the organization and the worker.

Trying to classify workers as household employees or paying stipends often violates labor laws. It also undermines the professionalism of our field. A legitimate employer-employee structure shows that your organization is responsible, ethical, and built to last. It assures donors and grant funders that their money supports a credible, compliant organization.

Turning wildlife rehabilitation from an avocation into a vocation requires understanding the true cost of care, not only for the animals but for the people who provide it. Salaries, taxes, insurance, and benefits are not luxuries. They are part of doing business responsibly. Paying yourself and your staff properly also opens doors to new funding opportunities. Grantors respect organizations that operate professionally and treat their people fairly.

I have seen many dedicated rehabilitators give everything they had, physically and financially, without ever taking a paycheck. Their commitment was admirable but unsustainable. Eventually exhaustion sets in, and when that happens, the animals suffer too. That is the cycle we must break.

When you pay yourself and your staff, you are not taking from the animals. You are investing in their future. You are ensuring that care will continue, that work will be done safely, and that those who dedicate their lives to this calling can keep doing it for years to come.

This shift from avocation to vocation is not only about money. It is about respect. Respect for the profession, for the animals, and for yourself.

The Real Cost of Payroll

Writing payroll into your proposed budget does not mean you are obligated to pay that amount. The reason is simple: you already have the best employee possible—you. You can choose to take no salary at all, or only a partial one, if the money is not there. Since payroll taxes and insurance are based on percentages, if no payroll is dispersed, you owe nothing. The only cost is a few minutes spent filing zero payroll forms.

However, if you never set up payroll, you cannot legally take any pay when funds do become available. Having a payroll system in place gives you the flexibility to be paid if the opportunity arises and shows grantors and donors that your organization is structured for growth.

If you are not ready to hire yet, start by building this number into your annual budget as a goal. Even if it remains unpaid for a year or two, having it in your plan helps you visualize what sustainable staffing will look like. When donations or grants increase, that line can become real. That is how a center moves from hope to stability, from avocation to vocation.

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Here's what a thirty-five thousand dollar annual salary really costs an employer once taxes and insurance are included:

Estimated Employer Payroll Costs for One Employee ($35,000 Annual Salary)

Category	Rate (PA)	Annual Cost (PA)	Rate (NY)	Annual Cost (NY)	Notes
Social Security	6.2%	$2,170	6.2%	$2,170	Standard federal rate
Medicare	1.45%	$508	1.45%	$508	Standard federal rate
Federal Unemployment (FUTA)	*Exempt*	$0	*Exempt*	$0	501(c)(3) nonprofits are exempt
State Unemployment (SUTA)	~3.0%	$1,050	~3.5% (avg.)	$1,225	Varies by employer history
Workers' Compensation	2.5% (avg.)	$875	3.0% (avg.)	$1,050	Based on provider and claim record
Total Estimated Cost	—	**$4,600**	—	**$4,950**	Added to $35,000 base salary

Total Estimated Annual Cost (including wages):

- **Pennsylvania: ≈ $39,600**
- **New York: ≈ $39,950**

This means that to cover one full-time staff position, a nonprofit should budget around forty thousand dollars per year. This includes not only the paycheck but also the required taxes and insurance that make employment lawful and safe.

These numbers might seem intimidating at first, but breaking them down weekly helps put everything into perspective. Many centers already raise or spend this amount annually on food, supplies, and medical care. Adding a paid position is not unrealistic—it simply requires planning and commitment.

If you are not ready to hire yet, start by building this number into your annual budget as a goal. Even if it remains unpaid for a year or two, having it in your plan helps you visualize what sustainable staffing will look like. When donations or grants increase, that line can become real. That is how a center moves from hope to stability, from avocation to vocation.

Before the Final Word

As you think about adding paid staff, remember that this is not just a financial decision. It is about ensuring your center's long-term stability and protecting your ability to keep doing what you love. Each step toward professional structure—hiring, budgeting, training, and paying fairly—builds a stronger foundation for the animals who depend on you. What you are building is bigger than a job or even a career. You are building a legacy of care that will outlast any one person.

I understand it can feel uncomfortable asking for money to pay yourself. When people ask what the money is going toward, it can be hard to say, "my salary." But you are not asking for yourself. You are asking for the funds needed to cover the employees required to achieve your mission. It just so happens that since you are doing one hundred percent of the work, you are the mission.

You are the person who spends fifty percent of your time feeding and cleaning animals, twenty percent of your time talking to people on the phone, ten percent doing education programs, ten percent training volunteers, ten percent buried in paperwork and reports, and another ten percent raising money.

I know that adds up to one hundred and ten percent, but rehabilitators are that good. You are that good.

The Final Word

What you do with your rehabilitation passion is entirely up to you. It is perfectly fine to keep it part time and go no further. It is also fine to dream big, to grow, and to build something lasting. Just do not let fear or old ideas hold you back.

This work demands more than heart. It requires structure, funding, people, and a willingness to lead. Each step you take toward professionalism strengthens your ability to protect wildlife and teach others to do the same. When we build sustainable systems—when we plan for staff, training, and payroll—we are not moving away from our calling, we are safeguarding it.

In the end, it all comes back to the reason we started: to give every wild life a second chance. The paperwork, the fundraising, the planning, and the long hours all serve that single purpose. Keep that purpose close, and never forget that what you do matters. You are part of something rare, something that changes both the lives you touch and the people who witness your work. You are not just saving wildlife. You are shaping the future of how the world cares for it.