

WILDLIFE CALL HANDLING BASICS:

How to advise and save lives

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Why is Phone Advising So Vital?

You can save the lives of many wild animals just by giving good phone advice. The sad reality is that when people have a raccoon in their attic or see an orphaned squirrel outside, there is nothing “in the system” in most areas to help them. They usually make many phone calls, often to all the wrong places. This may lead them to take matters into their own hands, often with tragic outcomes. Or they may turn to nuisance wildlife control practitioners who charge them hundreds of dollars for a less-than-humane solution. The nice thing about phone advising is that you can help people quickly resolve a wildlife dilemma -- and save multiple animals -- in just a 5-minute phone call!



Challenges

The biggest challenge is how to handle calls correctly. Basically, you’re playing detective. A situation is revealed to you over the phone, and the “facts” are based on the caller’s description of the problem which may or may not be correct. Once you assemble the facts, you need to form a picture of what is happening, why it is happening, and figure out the best way to resolve it. There are life and death implications to what you’re doing because if you give the wrong advice, an animal—or many animals!—may die as a result. So there’s some pressure inherent in the job, along with the stress of dealing with highly emotional, and often angry people experiencing a scary situation or one they feel they can’t cope with.

The Psychology of Handling Callers

Often the caller is angry or upset, and takes out his/her emotions by being very rude to you. Let it bounce off you! They’re mad at the situation, not you. They feel out of control. Yet sometimes we do need to remind callers that if they continue to be rude, we can’t help them -- we’re trying our best and their anger is getting in the way of assisting them.

First steps: Calm the caller; assure them that you understand how they feel (even if you don’t!) **and that you will help them.** Once they calm down, they’re in a better place to listen to your advice. But when they’re at the height of their emotions, they’re not likely to be receptive to anything you’re saying. When you assure them you can help, they’ll calm down even more.

It’s also important to match your solution to something the caller can and is willing to do. For some callers, the idea of letting a skunk out of a trap is akin to jumping off a bridge, while other callers are willing to arm themselves with a towel and follow our simple advice for releasing an animal that never should have been trapped in the first place (one of the most common calls we get in July is “I set a trap for a woodchuck and caught a skunk....”)

Callers often wrongly interpret the animal's motivation. They think the animal is "out to get them" rather than realizing that the raccoon is in the chimney because that's a good denning site for raising young. The raccoon doesn't want THEM or their kids, or to get into the rest of their house, she has what she wants – a nice cavity to raise young in!

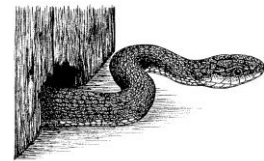
Just explaining the animal's *behavior in ways people can understand and relate to* is half the battle. Then they see that the animal is just like them, merely wanting to protect and raise her kids. Their misplaced fears are allayed, we can then move on to a good solution.

Resource Materials

Be sure to have log forms ready and good reference books (such as Humane Wildlife Conflict Resolution Guide, published by HSUS) and web sites so that you can look up vital information. To give good advice, you need to understand the behavior of the wild animals you deal with, have species identification tools, and have good reference lists of local rescuers, re-nesters, wildlife rehabilitators (and the species they handle) and nuisance wildlife control operators who meet humane standards (see recommended standards in this manual).

Visualizing the Call

Number 1 Rule: Don't rush to give advice! Rather, ask enough questions – and ask for photo or video clips on your Iphone - so you actually *see* the situation at hand before giving any advice. Make sure the species is what it's reported to be, and make sure you fully understand the circumstance. If you aren't sure, take the time to research the answer. Tell the caller that you'll phone them back in 5-10 minutes with an answer.



Confirm:

- **Species identification:** If the call is about a skunk in a window well, first make sure the animal is actually a skunk! Is it striped and black and white? Or do they just think it's a skunk because it smells? Request that the caller send you video or photo clips so you can see its appearance, size, how it moves.
- **Age of animal:** Are you dealing with an adult or a baby? Whether or not they need help, what's "normal" behavior, and the ability of the public to contain and transport the animal will depend on this crucial distinction.
- **Behavior:** What is the animal doing, is it normal or odd? Why does the caller think the behavior is abnormal or the animal is hurt/ orphaned?
- **Ask about circumstances.** How long has the animal been there? What may have happened in the immediate environment to cause the problem? Are there openings the animal fell through? Were cats or dogs involved? Is the animal hurt? What makes you think so? Is the animal stuck? How can you tell?

- **Understand the animal.** You'll need to know something about the animal's capabilities and species-specific differences when assessing how to resolve a particular problem. For example, a squirrel in a chimney is usually stuck and can't climb out, whereas a raccoon means to be there, can easily shimmy up the flue, and may even be raising young on the smoke shelf. Pigeons on window sills appear stuck but may actually be incubating eggs.
- **Is the animal truly orphaned?** Make sure the animal really is orphaned and needs help. Some animals appear orphaned but they're not – for example, fawns and baby rabbits are left alone most of the time because the mother does not want to attract predators to her nest by her scent --- so she only returns a few times a day to nurse her young. Baby cottontails leave the nest when they're only 3 weeks old and they look helpless, but their instinct is strong and they're ready to go. Fawns will start traveling around with their mother at about a month old so their peak period of vulnerability ends around then. So we have to assure callers that the visual absence of the mother is perfectly normal for these two species.



However, a baby raccoon wandering around by himself for hours or a baby squirrel running after people are sure signs that the animal in question is orphaned, because mother raccoons and squirrels supervise their young closely and don't leave them alone for long. In many of these cases, we will recommend that the caller contact a rehabilitator, and we use our directories to locate several in their area and then refer the caller to them.

- **Reuniting should be the first priority:** If there's a good chance the parent animal(s) is still around, always try to reunite the young with their family. All wild animal babies do better when raised by their own parents and own species. Rehabilitators do their best, but they can't teach essential skills such as how to hunt efficiently, how to avoid predators, or even prey recognition. Because of this, wild animals raised by rehabilitators are usually at a disadvantage when released, and may have lower-than-normal survival rates.
- **Don't give advice until you are confident of the best answer:** Never guess how a situation should be handled, ask enough questions and consult reference materials, your local rehabilitator or CWRA until you are sure. Bad advice can lead to tragic outcomes. Even the most panicked callers will accept it when you say you'll call them back in 5-10 minutes with an answer.
- **Make good referrals.** Only refer to wildlife rehabilitators if the animal definitely needs help. It is very expensive to rehabilitate a wild animal, for example a single raccoon cub can cost the rehabilitator over \$250 once formula, nuts, dog chow, vaccines, veterinary assistance and housing supplies are factored in. Most rehabilitators donate their time and pay for their rehabilitation out of their own pockets, so unnecessary referrals are a burden to them AND not in the animal's best interest. The bottom line: make sure the animal in question truly needs help or human intervention. If you're unsure, ask more questions!

Nuisance Wildlife Calls

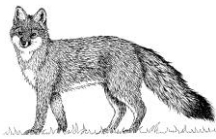
- **Ask what's concerning the caller:** Often the “problem” is just the mere presence of the animal; the caller has unfounded fears. Assurance and education may be all that's needed.
- **Tailor your advice to their concerns:** Don't assume what the problem is, ask the caller exactly what is concerning them. A skunk in the yard may raise fears of being sprayed for one person, while another person may assume the skunk is going to chew apart their shed. Target your advice to what concerns the caller.
- **Playing detective:** Figuring out nuisance wildlife calls can be quite tricky because often all that is reported is some strange sound or damage. You can't see the animal, you just have to put together clues to form a mental picture. Sometime you can ask the caller to do a test (ex: put down flour to capture tracks) to determine what the animal is. Sometimes location of problem and time of day are enough to narrow down the search (i.e. loud chewing and scampering noises at night may be flying squirrels, yet Norway rats can be a chewing culprit any time of day too). Ask for photographic evidence wherever possible.
- **Confirm:** If an animal is making a sound, ask callers to hold up the phone so you can hear it. Sometimes their idea of a chirp is really a chitter, revealing not a bird but a raccoon. Then you need to ask more questions, and see video footage, to figure out how the animal got into the structure, if the animal is stuck or intends to be there, whether young are present, and the best way and time to evict the animal(s).
- **Self-help versus referrals:** Our emphasis is on helping the homeowner solve the problem themselves *if it's completely safe to do so* and if they're willing. People become empowered when they solve a wildlife problem by themselves. However, certain types of problems require more specialized knowledge and techniques, and that's where you'll need to refer them to a humane nuisance wildlife control specialist.
- **Most animal problems are really *people problems*:** The source of most nuisance conflicts is one of the caller's own making --usually they have intentionally -- or unintentionally -- provided a food source or nesting/ denning area for the wild animal. The biggest challenge can be getting callers to see how their own behavior is causing the problem -- and is what needs to be fixed.
- **Eviction and Exclusion:** The basis for resolving most nuisance wildlife complaints is to evict the animals as a family unit, at the biologically right time, so the parent(s) can move the young to a new den site. Then the entry points need to be properly sealed, to prevent any further access. Once the home is animal-proofed, it doesn't matter how many animals are in the neighborhood because they won't be able to get back in. Animal-proofing one's home is the answer --i.e. solving problems at their source.



Trapping: Rarely the Answer

- One of our biggest problems is that people automatically set a trap when they have a wild animal problem. Then a few days later, they hear crying sounds in the attic, chimney or yard, and only then realize they took the mother away and now helpless young are left behind.
- So many of these trapping tragedies are preventable. We always assume that *any* animal trapped in spring and summer –and even fall, for some species -- is a mother with young. For this reason, we encourage the *eviction* of animal families and give the mother a chance to relocate her own young in the habitat she knows.
- We work hard to get nuisance wildlife control companies to stop removing so many wild animals during the birthing and rearing seasons and instead adopt eviction and exclusion practices, such as those practiced by *AAA Wildlife Control* in Canada. It may be cheap and easy to trap wild animals but it's not an effective solution and often leads to tragic and inhumane outcomes.
- Nature abhors a vacuum! Trapped animals will soon be replaced by others in the surrounding area, another reason trapping isn't an effective or long-lasting solution.

Relocation: Isn't That a Humane Choice?



Taking a wild animal out of the habitat she knows and dumping her somewhere unfamiliar is akin to you being spirited away and dumped in the middle of nowhere with no food, money, map, cell phone or computer. Her instant reaction is to search frantically for home, and in the process, she may get beaten up by resident animals, hit by a vehicle, or preyed upon.. She may not know where good escape corridors are or have known food sources. And she may also be a mother now separated from her babies, and frantically searching for them.

For many animals, relocation is a death sentence. This is why we strongly encourage people to let the “problem” animals stay in their home habitat --- after all, once the source of the problem is fixed, there's little reason not to – they won't be getting back into your home.

For more information, go to crawildlife.org or visit us on Facebook!

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