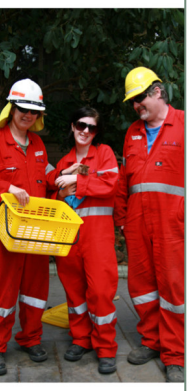
Caring for Wildlife

FACTSHEET

Department of Sustainability and Environment

Rehabilitating wildlife in Victoria **Series No: 1**



4.1 Introduction to wildlife rehabilitation

What is wildlife rehabilitation?

Wildlife rehabilitation is the process of providing care and support to injured native animals in an effort to give them a second chance to live free again in their natural habitat.

How do the animals become injured?

Wildlife can be inadvertently or deliberately injured, orphaned or killed as a result of human activities or as a result of natural disasters such as fire, flood or drought. For example, wildlife may suffer injuries as a result of animal-vehicle collisions, chemical spills, dog attack or collision with power lines.

What does wildlife rehabilitation involve?

Wildlife rehabilitation involves a broad range of skills and techniques to provide effective care and release of native animals.

Rehabilitators must be able to safely capture and handle wild animals in distress, administer basic first aid and health care, provide appropriate nutrition and feeding methods and meet the behavioural, environmental and housing needs of a wide range of species. They also need to understand and practice safe and humane release techniques.

This must be achieved with minimal human contact to minimise stress and ensure there are no unintended consequences such as death or further injury. It is also important that the animals do not become dependent on humans as this will limit their chances of survival once released.

What types of wildlife are rehabilitated?

The most commonly treated species are Common Ringtail Possums, Common Brushtail Possums, Australian Magpies, Eastern Grey Kangaroos and Pacific Black Ducks. A smaller number of threatened and less common species such as Grey-headed Flying Foxes and Grey Goshawks are also treated.

Wildlife rehabilitation in Victoria

Wildlife rehabilitation is undertaken by a network of dedicated and tireless volunteers who provide a valuable service to assist wild animals found in pain or distress. There are two types of rehabilitator: (i) wildlife shelter operators and (ii) foster carers.

Shelter operators are generally experienced carers who have the expertise and facilities to house a range of wildlife in need of care, including those with complex husbandry requirements. Foster carers are generally less experienced and are required to operate under the guidance of a nominated shelter operator and are only permitted to care for easy to look after species.

There are currently 340 wildlife shelter operators and 363 foster carers authorised to rehabilitate wildlife in Victoria.

How many animals are treated per year?

Around 7,000 native animals are treated in Victorian shelters each year.

What should I do if I find injured wildlife?

If you find a sick or injured native animal, you should report it immediately to the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) Customer Service Centre (CSC) on 136 186. The CSC will provide you with details of a DSE staff member or local shelter that can provide advice or help.

It is important that you do not attempt to catch the animal as it may become frightened or stressed. You may also worsen its injuries or illness. All wild animals should be treated with caution, especially when they are distressed and injured.

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Government support for volunteers

Wildlife rehabilitators are mostly unpaid volunteers who fund the expenses of rehabilitation from their own pockets or through donations and sponsorships from the community.

The Victorian Government also provides funding opportunities through grant schemes such as the Victorian Volunteer Small Grants Program and other one-off initiatives. For example, in 2008 the government provided $500,000 in grants to enable rehabilitators to purchase new facilities and equipment. A further $350,000 grant program was recently announced to support rescue and rehabilitation efforts as a result of Victoria's devastating bushfires. A further $600,000 will be provided in grants over the next two years.

The Government also funded the construction of the $6 million Australian Wildlife Health Centre at Healesville Sanctuary.

How do I become a rehabilitator?

Many people are attracted to wildlife rehabilitation as they believe it will be a valuable and rewarding experience. While this is true, there are often more facets to rehabilitation than most people initially expect. Caring for injured wildlife can be physically and mentally demanding, emotionally stressful and costly. It also involves many unpleasant such as cleaning wounds, scrubbing cages and euthanasing animals that are suffering.

If you think that you have time and resources to devote to wildlife rehabilitation, the best starting point is to provide volunteer services to an experienced shelter (eg. cage building, transporting animals or helping to feed or clean cages) or become an authorised foster-carer (see below for further details).

Application forms to become a wildlife shelter or a foster carer can be found on the DSE website at www.dse.vic.gov.au.

Are all wildlife rehabilitators authorised?

All wildlife rehabilitators, including shelter operators and foster carers must be authorised by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). Shelter operators are also required to maintain and submit an annual record of all animal admissions.

These records help DSE to monitor the movement of wildlife and to understand the reasons why animals are brought to shelters, the species involved, where they are coming from and the outcomes of rehabilitation.

They also help to ensure that the primary aim of rehabilitation is to release the native animals back into the wild.

Protecting native animals welfare

Accepting native animals for care is a large responsibility, and while most wildlife rehabilitators have the best interests of the animal at heart, poor wildlife rehabilitation practices may prolong the animal's suffering.

Wildlife rehabilitation may result in suffering for the injured wildlife as a result of:

- stress associated with handling and capture
- incorrect care or treatment methods
- inappropriate containment facilities
- attempts to rehabilitate animals that are not going to survive
- releasing animals into new or inappropriate habitat.

It is also important that wildlife admitted to shelters do not become dependent on humans for survival and that the rehabilitation process does not provide an avenue for private individuals to obtain native wildlife to keep as pets or to sell for commercial purposes.

For these reasons, all rehabilitators are required to comply with the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals during Rehabilitation, under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*.

This Code outlines the responsibilities of rehabilitators in order to protect the welfare of animals undergoing all stages of rehabilitation. Importantly, the Code requires euthanasia of any wildlife that is considered unlikely to recover sufficiently for release back into the wild, or if there is uncertainty regarding the release site. The relocation of animals to new areas is not permitted.

More information

For further information on wildlife rehabilitation, please visit the DSE website at www.dse.vic.gov.au

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