

# Wildlife Search and Rescue

A Guide for First Responders



Rebecca Dmytryk

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



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# **Table of Contents**

**[Companion Website](#)**

**[Title Page](#)**

**[Copyright](#)**

**[Dedication](#)**

**[Reader's Attention](#)**

**[Foreword](#)**

**[Preface](#)**

**[Image credits](#)**

**[Chapter 1: Overview of wildlife rescue](#)**

**[Chapter 2: Characterizing wildlife search and rescue](#)**

**[Chapter 3: Laws and regulations governing wildlife rescue in the USA](#)**

**[Chapter 4: Code of practice](#)**

## **Chapter 5: The components of wildlife search and rescue**

**Human safety**

**The welfare of the animal**

**Potential for success**

## **Chapter 6: Anatomy of a response team**

## **Chapter 7: Overview of wildlife capture equipment**

**The towel**

**Herding boards**

**Nets and netting**

**Land seine**

**Mechanical nets**

**Driving, funnel, and walk-in traps**

**The dho-gaza**

**Drop traps**

**Cage traps**

**Projectile-powered nets**

**Lures**

**Catchpole**

## **Chapter 8: Capture, handling, and confinement of wild birds**

**Techniques for capturing wild birds**

**Anecdote: The rescue of the elusive beer-can-collared-gull**

**Special circumstances and particular methods**

**Anecdote: Ducklings and the infinity pool**

**Anecdote: The story of Pinky the turkey**

**Handling and restraint of wild birds**

**Processing from nets and housing**

**Short-term and temporary housing for wild birds**

## **Chapter 9: Capture, handling, and confinement of land mammals**

**Techniques for capturing wild mammals**

**Special circumstances and particular methods**

**Physical restraint of land mammals**

**Processing mammals from nets and cages**

**Temporary confinement of land mammals**

## **Chapter 10: Capture and handling of reptiles and amphibians**

## **Chapter 11: Marine mammal rescue**

**Rescuing seals and sea lions**

**Young seals and sea lions**

**Physical restraint of seals and sea lions**

**Confinement and transport of pinnipeds**

**Cetaceans**

## **Chapter 12: Basic wildlife first aid and stabilization**

**Performing a cursory physical examination**

**Bleeding**

**Dehydration**

**Fluid therapy**

**Treating hypothermia**

**Treating hyperthermia**

**Basic wound care**

**Stabilizing fractures**

## **Chapter 13: Transporting wildlife**

## **Chapter 14: Field euthanasia**

## **Chapter 15: Life, liberty, and euthanasia**

**Anecdote: The story of Peg**

## **Chapter 16: Rescuing baby birds and land mammals**

## **Chapter 17: Reuniting, re-nesting, and wild-fostering**

**Returning altricial chicks to the wild**

**Anecdote: Return of baby barn owls**

**Returning precocial chicks to the wild**

**Returning baby mammals to the wild**

*Nutritional support*

## *Chapter 18: Offering public service*

*Public relations and the art of shapeshifting*  
*Contracting with municipalities*

## *Appendix 1: Ready packs*

*Twenty-four hour pack*

*Toolbox*

*Search and rescue*

*Hell box*

## *Appendix 2: Wildlife observation form*

## *Appendix 3: Wildlife trauma equipment and supplies*

*Equipment*

*Bandaging*

*Solutions, ointments, gels*

*Thermoregulation*

*Fluid therapy*

*Other*

## *Appendix 4: Instructions for tying nooses*

*Tying monofilament line nooses*

*Tying nooses to welded wire*

**[Appendix 5: Barn owl box plans and instructions](#)**

**[Appendix 6: Sample contract](#)**

**[Agreement for professional services](#)**

**[Recitals](#)**

**[Exhibit A: Scope of services](#)**

**[Exhibit B: Policies and procedures](#)**

**[Further reading](#)**

**[Index](#)**



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**A Guide for First Responders**

**Rebecca Dmytryk**

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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*This book is dedicated to wild creatures and their wild lands.  
Aho Mitakuye Oyasin (to all my relations)*

This book is intended solely as a guide to appropriate procedures for response to emergencies involving wild animals based on the most current recommendations of responsible sources, yet, because of the uniqueness of emergencies, certain situations may require additional safety measures other than those described herein. Therefore, readers are cautioned to use their best judgment and adopt all safety precautions indicated by their activities. Additionally, this book is not meant to be used to advise anyone as to their legal authority to capture, possess, and treat wildlife. By following guidance contained herein the reader willingly assumes all risks in connection with such activities.

# ***Foreword***

Two nights ago I had dinner with a friend who lives only a mile away from my home in a rural mountainous area. It was about 10 p.m. when I headed home. As I turned onto a short stretch of two-lane highway I immediately saw eyes in my headlights. The eyes belonged to a terrified doe that had been hit by a car and was struggling to get up off the pavement. She was very alert. Her front legs seemed to function, but as she attempted to pull herself up I noticed that her back end was not functioning. So there she lay, on the side of the road, thrashing and attempting to drag her injured body into the brush.

I drove about 50 feet past her and parked the car. At the same time, another car stopped about 50 feet before her and a man stepped out. I grabbed one of the large spare towels that I keep in the back of my car and quickly walked up to the struggling animal. She was breathing heavily and was in a severe state of stress and panic. I gently wrapped the towel around her head, being sure to cover her eyes. The towel also provided cushioning for her face. I then firmly pushed on the back of her neck to simulate the pressure of a predator. I pressed her to the ground and she responded by lying still.

I instructed my new assistant to take my place, behind her back, and gently but firmly maintain pressure to her neck to keep her still so I could examine her injuries. I instructed him not to pet or console her, but to just hold her firmly in place.

The man was very concerned and upset and every time she moved he wanted to pet her, hold her, and console her. I kept gently reminding him to stay to her back to avoid her powerful legs and to keep pressure on her—not to cuddle

her, as she would not understand his sentiments. To her, he was a predator. He understood and did very well at controlling his urge to handle her unnecessarily.

I discovered that the deer had a broken back, broken pelvis, or something equally critical for an adult deer. I explained to the man that a deer with any injury that rendered it unable to walk was basically a dead deer, as there was no feasible way to help a wild, struggling, near 200-pound adult deer recover from such injuries. Plus, she was bleeding from her anus and her nostrils, which implied internal bleeding.

It was clear that the most humane thing to do for this poor animal was to euthanize her as soon as possible. My new friend sadly, but bravely, agreed. We switched positions again so he could call the local police department while I kept the deer as calm as possible. What was interesting to me was the conversation I had with this man during the 15 minutes that we waited for an officer to arrive.

The man looked me right in the eyes with deep emotion and awe and said, "How do you know this stuff?"

"Know what?" I responded.

"Know that her head needed to be covered, and how you predicted she would respond to us, and how to handle all of this?"

"Well," I said, "I rehabilitate wildlife for a living, so I have an advantage. I understand the nature and natural history of deer. I used to raise them from infancy and I have cared for many adult deer. I know that deer are prey species with an acute sense of hearing and sight. The first thing that needs to be done when encountering an injured deer is to do what you can to block the senses that trigger panic. So an old towel is the perfect tool to do that, plus it acts as a cushion. She could still hear us, but she was not seeing us, so her desire to bolt was greatly reduced. Because she is a prey species, when we put pressure on her neck she

responded to what she probably experienced as an attack. A lion would bite her neck and hold her while he killed her. We applied the same kind of pressure to keep her still.

I placed you on the back side of her because her thrashing legs are very powerful and most of the injuries sustained by people who help injured deer are from thrashing legs.

"It really worked. I am so impressed and happy that you came along," he said in amazement, and he thanked me profusely for helping the poor animal.

When the officer arrived we discussed the situation with her and she fully agreed that the best thing to do for the deer was to shoot her. The officer told us how much she hated her job at times like this.

I left the scene saddened, of course, but somehow renewed because I felt my actions had helped an animal, if only for a short time, and perhaps had a positive influence on a very concerned person who witnessed the end of a wild animal's life that he had played a role in helping. I imagined he, too, came away sad, but inspired.

As I drove home, I realized that my actions were automatic. When I saw the deer on the road, I knew exactly what to do, and it was more than just caring for the deer.

What the man didn't know was that as I was parking the car I was already making a plan. I called my friend who I'd just had dinner with and put her on alert in case I needed assistance. Without even thinking, I grabbed the towel, and made a mental review of what supplies I had in the car. I had rope, plastic bags, extra towels, etc.

I also knew that this man who had also stopped to help the deer could be emotional and might respond in a way that would put him and me in danger, so I considered the best way to use his help and keep us both safe while helping the animal. Then, as I walked toward the deer with towel in hand, I decided whom to call should the deer need to be dispatched. So, by the time I arrived at the animal, I already



had a plan in my mind. I also knew that the plan could and should be altered according to changes in the circumstances.

I did all of this automatically and swiftly—I am a wildlife rehabilitator, a first responder and wildlife paramedic.

Much of what I know, I have learned the hard way—through trial and error, especially in my early days. I did not have a book or a manual to guide me and I am sure I made my share of mistakes. This book, *Wildlife Search and Rescue: A Guide for First Responders*, is truly a Godsend. It is not only very much needed, it is the first book of its kind that emphasizes the simple and basic principles, like the ones I used in helping the deer, that are key aspects of being a first responder to wildlife emergencies. Know the natural history of the animals you are working with. Know what stimulates each species, and once you understand that, then you can decide how to calm them. Know stress, and know not to be afraid of it. Understand its purpose, and use it to your advantage. Know basic medical techniques so that you can minimize injury and an animal's suffering. Above all, know that human safety comes first. You cannot help animals if you are injured and as a first responder you are also responsible for the health and safety of others around you.

These and many other fundamentals, which may seem obvious, but aren't in a time of crisis, are clearly outlined in this book. This valuable book's intent is to provide you with smart and proven techniques to help you to be responsible, safe, and effective when attempting to aid wild animals in peril. In essence, this book is just like the towel—it's another tool to help you reduce suffering and save lives. Read it, understand it, and apply it, and, like me, you will “know” how to react to a wildlife crisis situation when you encounter one.

Jay Holcomb

Executive Director  
International Bird Rescue

# ***Preface***

For wildlife casualties and the people who find them, often the greatest challenge is locating someone with the necessary skills who is available to help. In the absence of specially trained personnel, animals' lives are lost. This may be the most significant cause of death among wildlife accident victims—one that has, for the most part, gone unnoticed, undocumented, and ignored.

It would be far better if we could say that overall response is substandard, but the issue is far worse—there are no standards. Just as it was for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) prior to the 1970s, currently there are no standards for provision of care for disabled native wildlife. Other than laws regulating the possession of wild species, there is no mandate for response and no direction on “best practices.”

The rescue of a wild animal in distress is not simply grabbing a net, chasing it down, and placing it in a box. From the moment an animal is discovered, the action taken—the type of equipment used, the degree of handling, the method of confinement, and what initial aid is provided—can mean the difference between life and death. It is that simple.

If I were to contribute one single thing to the field of wildlife rehabilitation, it would be this concept: the rescue of wildlife casualties begins not at the wildlife hospital, but in the field, when and where the animals are first found. The most heroic, most skilled rehabilitation efforts will do no good if the animal doesn't make it to the treatment table. Therein lies the objective of this book.

This book is an attempt to lay a foundation for standards for wildlife search and rescue, offering examples of basic “best practices.” It is meant to be a tool for existing animal rescue programs, to help them build or strengthen their

capabilities. It is also intended for use by impromptu rescuers.

## Image credits

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# ***Chapter 1***

## ***Overview of wildlife rescue***

On any given day in the United States, it can be estimated that tens of thousands of wild birds and mammals suffer injuries directly attributable to humans. Causes of such anthropogenic injuries include motor vehicles, power lines, domestic dogs and cats, pesticide use, pollution and oil spills, errant fishing line, and intentional acts of cruelty.

During spring and summer months, when tree trimming and brush clearing is rampant, the number of wild animals that are displaced or injured can triple. Entire populations can be impacted through loss of habitat and natural disasters, increasing the number of potential wildlife victims to an even greater figure.

The estimated number of wildlife casualties is based on records of wild animals that have been reported or rescued—a journey that begins when an animal is first observed by someone who is willing to seek help. With luck, the *finder's* quest will lead them to a specially trained wildlife professional.

The rescue of wild animals requires a unique set of skills, considerably different from those used in handling domestic animals. Not only do wild animals behave differently, capturing and handling them can be dangerous, especially for the animal. Wild creatures perceive approach and handling by humans as a threat; most will flee or fight for their lives, even if it kills them. How the animal is handled and the quality of care it receives can mean life or death. Even if the animal is not critically wounded, inadequate housing, mishandling, and improper food can be fatal. It is

therefore imperative that first responders receive specific training on proper methods of tending to wild animals in peril.

First and foremost, they must learn the natural history of the species they're going to encounter. This will help them locate individuals in distress and help them determine if an animal is behaving normally or needs to be rescued. Familiarity with the species will also help responders plan safe and successful capture strategies. Responders must also be trained and equipped to handle and confine wild animals without causing additional harm. If an animal requires immediate aid, first responders must be capable of providing basic life-saving emergency care—similar to human search and rescue personnel and paramedics. Wildlife search and rescue technician (WSART), wildlife paramedic, wildlife trauma specialist, wildlife EMT—these are relatively new terms being used to describe a specialized division of animal rescue. Unfortunately, however, these unique and valuable service providers are absent in most communities.

In the United States, for example, of the hundreds of licensed wildlife rehabilitation centers, relatively few provide field service. Instead of sending a team of experts into the field, they rely on animals being brought to their doors. This often leaves the actual rescue of an injured or ill wild animal to the finder. Finders who are unable or unwilling to perform a rescue themselves will look for help, which can be a daunting experience.

In some regions, game wardens will assist with calls regarding disabled wildlife. In urban environments, the duty of responding to reportedly disabled wildlife is often assumed by municipal animal control agencies as part of their public service. In either case, unless these officials are extensively trained and equipped specifically for wildlife, they can do more harm than good.

In the absence of someone with the skills to find, identify, assess, and provide immediate aid to wild animals in distress, countless lives are lost. This often-overlooked issue may very well be the greatest dilemma faced by wildlife casualties and the people who find them.

## ***Chapter 2***

# ***Characterizing wildlife search and rescue***

The term Wildlife Search and Rescue, or Wildlife SAR, is used to define the action taken on behalf of a wild animal in distress. It is the act of responding to a reportedly disabled animal, or an animal in immediate danger, providing for its immediate needs and, where appropriate, delivering it to definitive care where it may recover and be returned to the wild.

Whether a community is faced with thousands of injured animals during a disaster, or confronted with a few individuals here and there, responders should be adequately trained, equipped, and prepared to provide professional Wildlife Search and Rescue services.

Some rescues can be as simple as providing advice over the telephone, or placing a hatchling back into its nest. Others can be gruelingly complicated, like untangling the antlers of a buck from a barbed wire fence. In any event, a foundation of sound principles and a required level of training can ensure safer, more successful missions. Yet, to date, there are no standards for provision of care for wildlife casualties, similar to the state of pre-hospital care in the United States prior to the 1970s.

In 1966, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) published a study entitled *Accidental Death and Disability: The Neglected Disease of Modern Society*. Often referred to as the White Paper, the report quantified the magnitude of death and injury caused by accidents in the United States,



and explicitly outlined deficiencies in emergency medical care.

The paper revealed that morticians were providing at least half of the nation's ambulance services, with hearses being used to transport patients. It also noted that the majority of emergency responders had little to no training in first aid or life saving techniques. Because of this, it pointed out that an injured person had a better chance of surviving on a battlefield, with a trained armed forces medic, than on a US highway.

The report went on to make specific recommendations, among them the idea of having a single nationwide number to summon emergency assistance; this would later become the 9-1-1 system used today. The paper also called for standards for the provision of emergency medical care. This included training criteria for emergency responders and attention to ambulance design and function. This landmark publication was the impetus for major improvements from which the modern Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system was born.

Today, EMS is made up of a network of multifaceted service providers. Together, they have become the front line for public safety, providing aid from primary response to definitive care: for example, from the scene of an accident to a hospital. These first responders receive special training in rescue, stabilization, transportation, and advanced treatment of trauma and other medical emergencies.

To identify their unique service, an emblem emerged in 1973 known as the Star of Life. Each of the star's six points represents a stage of service: detection, reporting, response, on-scene care, care in transit, and transfer to definitive care. The response to a reportedly injured animal shares these phases of action.

A wildlife rescue begins when a person first discovers a wild animal they believe is in distress. The second stage is

their call for assistance. Ideally, they will reach a wildlife Call Taker, similar to a 9-1-1 dispatcher, who provides an initial assessment of the situation and advises the caller on what to do. Once rescue personnel arrive on scene they evaluate the animal's condition further, and tend to its immediate needs. If it requires additional treatment, the animal is transported to definitive care—a wildlife hospital or wildlife rehabilitation center.

The term “wildlife rehabilitation” means the professional nursing of sick, injured, or orphaned wild animals with the intent of returning them to their natural habitat. Most wildlife rehabilitators are licensed and have years of training and guidance. Rehabilitation centers can range from large, high-tech sprawling compounds to modest, home-based operations.

During convalescence, animals must be housed and cared for so they retain their wildness and their natural fear of humans. Before an animal can be released it must be free of disease and show that it has a reasonable chance of survival in the wild. It must be capable of obtaining appropriate food and shelter, and have the ability to escape predation.

Prior to release, some rehabilitation programs outfit their patients with an identifying mark. Mammals may be fitted with a tag, often on the ear, whereas birds are typically ringed with a metal band on one leg. This marking helps track the success of freed patients. Despite numerous documented cases of long-term survival, wildlife rehabilitation efforts are, at times, called into question.

From a wildlife conservation perspective, the rescue and rehabilitation of individual animals receives occasional criticism for being a waste of time and resources. Unless the process involves an endangered species or a large population, wildlife rehabilitation is largely discounted.

What critics often fail to realize is that wildlife rescuers and rehabilitators keep their skills honed through everyday

practice with more common species. When it comes time to treat an endangered animal or large numbers of patients, they are able to meet the challenge. Also under-recognized is the valuable role wildlife rescue organizations play in their communities and in spreading conservation values.

Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation programs provide a valuable public service to the communities they serve. By being available to assist with found wildlife, these programs reduce the public's handling and possession of wild animals, increasing public safety.

As first responders, receiving initial reports from the public about injured or ill animals, rescue organizations are often the first to notice trends in wild populations: for example, the effects of toxins, changes in the environment, or disease outbreaks. Their ability to alert authorities early on can reduce the overall number of animals impacted.

Wildlife rescue organizations also inspire environmental stewardship and influence the public's perception of wildlife positively. Simply through their existence these programs foster the idea that wild animals have value and that individual animals deserve to be treated for their ailments. Additionally, these programs usually offer the means for community members to connect with wildlife in a profound way, helping to broaden their understanding and appreciation of wild animals and their habitats. Connections might be sparked by a newspaper story, a classroom presentation, volunteer opportunities, or knowing that efforts to save a wild creature are not in vain—that someone else, an entire team of dedicated specialists, is there to help. Whatever the case, these connections are considerable, even life-changing.

For wildlife search and rescue personnel, the shared desire to help a wild animal is the common thread—the foundation upon which to develop a relationship with the finder. Sometimes it helps to understand a person's perspective.

For some, the desire to help a wild animal will stem from a sense of duty, or obligation, especially if they feel responsible for the animal's mishap. For others, it could be transference of goodwill, or an act of compassion, or empathy. For others still, it might be a feeling of moral obligation to treat living things with respect, honoring an animal's intrinsic value as an individual and its right to live.

This compassion for the individual is depicted in an essay, entitled *The Star Thrower*, by anthropologist and author Loren Eiseley (1907-77). It is a story that is often shared among rescuers.

In short, one morning, a gentleman is walking a long stretch of storm-ravaged beach where thousands of starfish lie grounded. He notices a human figure in the distance, farther down the beach. The person appears to be dancing. As he approaches he sees that it is not a dancer but a young man gently tossing starfish, one by one, out to sea. Confronting the young man he asks why he is throwing starfish into the ocean. The young man explains that if he doesn't get them back into the water soon they will die. The gentleman responds with the notion that the young man cannot possibly make a difference, not with the miles of coastline and thousands of dying starfish. The young man bends down, picks up another starfish and casts it beyond the breaking waves, replying, "It made a difference for that one."

The story of the Star Thrower exemplifies the power of the individual—the individual animal and the individual person. Coming face to face with an animal in distress is a very powerful, pivotal moment. The subsequent action taken by the person speaks volumes about their personal values and possibly those of the culture or society in which they live.

In general, providing care to injured, ill, or orphaned wild animals is considered the right thing to do. Programs that offer rescue and rehabilitative care for wildlife exist because

it is what the people of a town or city or country want. Essentially, these programs are defined and perpetuated by the people. Oversight of the programs, however, is commonly assumed by government entities. Chapter 3 provides a summary of authorities and regulations that pertain to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.

## ***Chapter 3***

# ***Laws and regulations governing wildlife rescue in the USA***

In North America, the beginnings of wildlife protection can be traced back centuries to English Common Law, where the King held all wild game in “sacred trust” for the people. Colonialists brought with them, and followed, this basic principle.

Later, during the Industrial Revolution, a burgeoning urban population placed excessive demands on natural resources and wild game was hunted at unsustainable levels. It was around that same time that sport hunting became a popular leisure activity among the urban upper class. Conflicts developed between these two hunting groups, resulting in the establishment of the first conservation policies.

In 1842, a Supreme Court ruling reaffirmed the principle that no one owns wildlife, and that these natural resources are to be held in trust by government for the benefit of its people. This court ruling, combined with the advocacy of the sport hunters, resulted in the Public Trust Doctrine.

This movement toward wildlife conservation inspired treaties between Canada and the United States and the creation of a unique set of principles called the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, emphasizing the importance of protecting wildlife species and habitats through sound science and active management. The model is composed of seven concepts: wildlife as public trust resources; elimination of markets for game; allocation of wildlife by law; wildlife should only be killed for a legitimate