



Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Devin Manky
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Wildlife rehabilitation: don't try this at this home

Every month at the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C., we receive inquiries from well-meaning individuals who have tried to raise or rehabilitate wild animals in their homes. These inquiries usually end with the caller stating that the animal is no longer doing well and wondering what to do next.

We encourage the finder to bring the animal to our rehabilitation facility for an examination. Typically, the animal has suffered some sort of malady that caused the caregiver to rescue it in the first place. In addition to the original injury or disease, we often see at least some form of secondary problem caused by inadequate home-care.



Helping herons: Rescue efforts are best left to the experts, such as those in photo above, since untrained people could end up causing more harm than good.

The majority of these home-rehabilitated wild animals do not survive to be released back to the wild. This is unfortunate because the finders have the animal's best interest at heart, but lack the training, skills and proper equipment needed to help the patient recover.

I remember a kind and caring older couple that brought in a bird found lying on its side, unable to use its legs. They fed and regularly cleaned it, and three times a day performed physiotherapy on its legs – stretching them in and out multiple times. What the couple did not realize, however, is that the bird had multiple fractures in both legs. The “physiotherapy” had prevented the fractures from setting and must have caused excruciating pain.

Some of the home rehabilitation stories are more bizarre than frightening. One caring lady found a young pigeon that had been pulled from its nest. She immediately looked up pigeons on the Internet, and learned that adult pigeons feed their young by offering a partially digested seed mash right from their throat. So, trying to mimic nature, she chewed up seeds and placed the young pigeon's head inside her own mouth to encourage it to feed. Of course this strategy didn't work and the young pigeon was eventually brought in to our rehabilitation facility.

The pigeon case highlights the source of a lot of misinformation about wildlife rehabilitation.

“I read it on the Internet,” has become a saying that causes grief for many professionals from different fields, not just wildlife rehabilitators. I suspect that auto mechanics see improper car repairs, home contractors see faulty renovations, and doctors see patient misdiagnoses – all due to faulty internet research.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a staunch supporter and regular user of the Net, but the information you find must be looked at with a critical eye. For instance, even if you discovered useful information about a wild animal's diet, it will not teach you how to prepare it, present it and supplement it with proper vitamins. As well, no injury is exactly the same as another and will require specific treatment depending upon the species of animal and its overall condition.

Each year, I speak with people who have brought us young birds they raised at home and were about to release. Yet, after doing some basic tests, we discovered that the birds couldn't fly well and their feathers were not waterproof. The birds had been housed indoors or in small outdoor flight aviaries – missing the appropriate exercise, sunlight and exposure to rain that encourages preening.

Rehabilitation centres like the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C. possess many years of cumulative experience and look after thousands of animals each year. We have researched the natural history, ecology, physiology and behaviour of hundreds of species. We also have access to the latest medications, procedures and techniques in wildlife rehabilitation. We maintain the proper caging and handling conditions for the animals and are able to see an animal through the many steps needed for successful release.

So the next time you find a wild animal in distress (which hopefully will be never), please *do* use the Internet. Use it to look up the nearest wildlife rehabilitation facility and give them a call for advice. By bringing an injured, orphaned or pollution damaged wild animal to a rehabilitation facility you will be giving it the best chance of recovery. Successful release back to the wild, after all, is the result that all of us want to see.