

So You Think You Want to be a Wildlife Rehabber?

Every day people say that they are "looking into" or "interested in" becoming a wildlife rehabber. I try to reply to give them links of who to get in touch with in their area to get started, but sometimes I just don't have the time, so I'm creating this post on to give people tips on how to get started.

Professional licensed wildlife rehabbers' are not the wildlife police. Professional wildlife rehabbers' do expect respect and do not appreciate when a good hearted citizen find a precious animal and then stop searching for proper care once a Google search has been done on how to feed it. One article gives knowledge - maybe, depending on source. Proper care requires experience! To use a simple example: A newly pregnant mother will read all the books, watch all the videos, have all the conversations and think she knows everything there is to know but the day that precious little life is brought to her to begin care, she realizes how unprepared she is. She has collected a little bit of knowledge in her studies but she is not fully prepared. A professional licensed wildlife rehabilitator can be like the parent of multiple children; they not only have knowledge but also EXPERIENCE.

The actual requirements differ from state to state, and it can be a bit overwhelming, but I STRONGLY suggest you start your quest by going to www.ahnow.org put in your zip code and click on 'wildlife emergency' to find the rehabbers that already exist closest to you. Email them, contact them online, text them, call them and tell them that you are interested in volunteering and learning about becoming a rehabber. I will warn you - not every rehabber will be welcoming, but keep calling around until you find someone that you mesh well with and that can help show you the ropes. Many wildlife rehabilitators are not people people – they are animal people. This is why they accept this very challenging field and continue this path.

BE GRACIOUS. We're tired. We're overworked. We're understaffed. We've seen 100 others like you that ended up not showing up, or showed up and took selfies and quit. We're frustrated - not by YOU but by others that said everything you are saying. Be willing to do dishes, laundry, clean cages, and do grunt work for a while as you learn. Be PATIENT in waiting for a rehabber to reply to you - especially if you are reaching out between the months of April - August which is our busiest time. (The best time to reach out to a rehabber is in the fall and winter months.) Be persistent, but be patient. Most of us have day jobs, families, and a million things going on at once, and you cannot be our top priority - the animals are. No offense, but that's just how it is. Take the time while you wait to google your state's name and the term "wildlife rehab" and READ about the requirements, your conservation department (sometimes called department of natural resources or fish and wildlife service) google the other rehabs in your area, the species that commonly come in

for your area. Here are just a few things that you should know to keep in mind when first starting out:

It takes TIME to get licensed and be a good wildlife rehabber. This is not a quick process. If I had to estimate it, I'd say 1-2 years, or 'seasons' volunteering with someone else, then 1-2 years with someone else's constant oversight, then another 5 years with daily support from a good mentor. A great rehabber never rehabs alone. We depend on community and we are constantly learning new things. It does not matter if you are a retired vet, registered vet tech, wildlife biologist, medical doctor, zoologist or anything else - You haven't worked with THESE animals and you do not know the laws and regulations for your area. While some of your knowledge will be extremely helpful down the road, at first you need to be humble and LEARN from those of us who have been doing this every day for years, decades... Even a veterinarian, with all their schooling and knowledge doesn't see as many distemper cases in 10 years what we see in one. We see leptospirosis, tick paralysis, toxoplasmosis, crazy things - that vets prevent a whole lot more than treat. By no means does that make us BETTER than a vet, but it's DIFFERENT. Our 'normal' isn't anyone else's normal, no matter what your background is. There isn't a rehabber on earth that needs or wants a new volunteer coming in the door telling them how to do their job. We know that you have knowledge too, but our knowledge has value for you first and we're taking time out of our day to train you. Value us and our experience, because we don't get a degree to show people, or any real quantitative way to prove our knowledge. Your knowledge may be vast, and we'll get to that, but first - listen. We'll get to know you in time and you can show us what you bring to the table. At first, focus on listening and learning instead and you'll go a lot further and get along a lot better.

"Grunt work" is 99% of what rehabbing is. Dishes, laundry, cage cleaning, hosing down outdoor cages, cleaning litter boxes, making formula, poop in general - that's just all part of the job. There is no position in rehab where you are 'above' doing that part of it. We're not 'punishing' you by making you do this work. It simply must be done, so we do it. ALL of us. If it feels like you are cleaning cages and not being allowed to feed babies, it's because you have less of a chance of harming an animal by cleaning a cage than feeding them. Babies are tricky to feed. We need to train you to do it and still watch you every second because it can go wrong so quickly. Personally, I love hearing a new volunteer hesitate and be afraid when first feeding an animal. I prefer a fearful volunteer to one that thinks they can feed on day one and has no fear. I want new volunteers to realize the risk involved in the simple act of feeding.

I don't want you to stay afraid. My job is to help you to be so knowledgeable and comfortable that the fear takes a backseat, but a volunteer with no fear terrifies me. Time spent cleaning cages is time well spent. You will get to feed babies too. Don't

worry. But it's never a punishment or a totem-pole thing. Everyone cleans cages. Even the VERY FEW pay positions in rehab still clean cages and go home with poop and cheerios in their hair. If you can't deal with that part of it, this isn't the job for you because it NEVER goes away.

You will NEVER make a "great" living rehabbing. Most of us are home rehabbers, working from our homes, and barely getting by. There are VERY FEW paid positions in wildlife rehab and for each paid position that exists, there are a LOT of VERY qualified people who want it. If you happen to be lucky enough to find a PAID position rehabbing, it still will barely pay your bills, and even if you make a dime over what you absolutely need to survive you'll just put it right back into the rehab just to save one more life that next year. There are no rich rehabbers. It doesn't happen. It won't happen. You will not be the first rehabber ever to get rich off of this work. There are great rewards in being a rehabber. The laugh of an otter, the kisses of a raccoon, the nibbles of a baby squirrel, the elbow sucking of a fawn, the baby beaver who stands on your foot to eat his sweet potato...the list goes on... Rewards that go beyond anything money can buy, but it will never buy you an expensive car or house. (Even if it did, you'd fill that house with raccoons and use that car to drive filthy critters to release sites and wonder why you even bought expensive things in the first place...)

Put the camera down. Walk away from your phone. We get it. The animals are cute, and you think you need to get pictures of everything to take home with you, but this is just bad practice. Selfies are strongly discouraged and most rehabbers will get very upset with you for posting photos of animals in their care. If you really need to take a picture, ASK FIRST. If you plan to post a photo online, ASK FIRST. Get EACH photo approved before you post it and most importantly - be prepared for what will happen when you post it. For my people, if they can't answer 10 questions about that animal before posting a photo, I don't want them to post it. If you post it, you WILL Get replies from people saying "I want one. Where do I get a baby raccoon?" or "I want to do this. Where do I sign up?" You will spend HOURS replying to people to explain that they are not pets, and the worse the photo the more explaining you'll have to do. We don't ever want someone to post a photo that makes the public think that they should get a pet squirrel, or raccoon, or think they could raise babies themselves because it 'looks easy'. In some states, a rehabber can lose their permit or license simply because they posted an inappropriate photo. Try to put the camera down and just live in the moment. Be with the animals. Learn how to handle them and work with them. The photos will come later. I promise.

Be reliable. I cannot stress this enough. If you tell a rehabber that you will come at 4pm every Tuesday, be there. Think of it like a job. Make it a priority. That rehabber is rearranging her sleep schedule around this. Even if they say it's no big deal, it is. It's hard to keep up with feeding schedules for seven different species and having

that extra hand one day or two days a week is a Godsend. Your not showing up can seriously wreck a schedule in ways that you'll never understand. If you really can't make it, give them lots of notice and offer to make up the time later that night, because chances are good that they're going to have to stay up late that night to get the feedings done that they missed that day. It seems like no big deal, but this isn't calling your boss and saying you'll be late - this is telling an animal that it's feeding time got pushed back. They don't understand, and there's no 'skipping' a feeding.

Be Honest - Try to continually ask yourself if this is still something you want to do. If it's too much, say so. If you want to do more, ask. We're busy trying to read the minds of 100 animals that can't speak, we can't also read your mind. I used to be a really intuitive person, but nowadays, I miss stuff. I'm just too busy to notice subtle cues that someone is having trouble. It doesn't mean I don't care. I just don't see it as easily as I once did, even if you think it should be obvious that you're upset about something. You've got to speak up. Can't say it? Text it. Write it. Email it. Communicate. Find a way.

Don't give up. If you really love this, if you really fall head over heels and KNOW in your heart this is something you want to do, but it's not working out for some reason, don't give up. I'm going to be honest here - we're not all the easiest people to get along with. Sometimes there's a reason that people work with animals and it's because they're not very good at working with humans. That's not always the case, but it happens. If you volunteer somewhere and you love the animals but really don't like other aspects of it, or if you volunteer somewhere that has cliques and you feel like you don't fit in, go somewhere else! Don't give up on it. We need more rehabbers! If you really love it, and it's not the workload or lack of pay that is bothering you but some other administrative or outside issue that is keeping you from staying on, find another place but keep with it. The animals need you. You WILL find someone that you click with and you'll find your way. Wildlife Rehabilitation is a calling not a career.

Start reading everything you can find. We have a ton of info on www.wildlifehotline.com about common calls from the public for each species. It would take DAYS to read it all. Offer to volunteer on phones for a local wildlife hotline like mine. You learn a lot by taking calls and it really helps your rehabbers to have someone's help on phones. When I started out I had the rehab phone forwarded to my home phone to help out and it helped to push my knowledge forward fast, plus it helped the rehab focus on animal care instead of a ringing phone. Grab some books on wildlife rehab too. Some are posted in this group's Files section. Buy a "48 Hours and Beyond" book from www.squirrelsandmore.com and read it cover to cover. Don't just watch cutesy videos on YouTube. Do the work. Learn as much as you can. But understand that every rehab and rehabber does things a little different from the next. Don't try to correct your mentors. If they do

things differently from the book you read, ask why - but don't tell them it's wrong. Chances are good there's a reason they do things they way they do. The animals haven't read these books, and it doesn't always go according to plan, but more knowledge is always better, so read everything you can. Join professional networks such as International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council or National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association. They offer journals to read and symposiums to attend.

Know When to SHUT UP. Have you been rehabbing squirrels for 10 years at home without a license? Did you raise 3 raccoons last year and release them on your own? Does your uncle have a pet skunk? You might not want to tell me that the second that we meet at a public conference with lots of people around!! And certainly don't tell Conservation or Game Wardens that! If you're hoping to get a license to rehab wildlife someday you should never start that conversation by saying that you're already doing it illegally! Of course tell your mentor that, and be honest, but make sure you are alone with them and the authorities aren't around when you say it. It doesn't matter if your 'vet said it was okay' or if you called someone somewhere and they 'told you how to do it'. It was ILLEGAL and some of us are required to report stuff like that. Please don't put us in that position or lock yourself out of ever getting a permit to rehab by admitting crimes that happened years ago. Plus, we are constantly fighting this image of 'crazy cat ladies' in the public eye and we want the chance to control our image, your image, to the public. If you had a pet opossum as a kid and you dressed it up for Halloween every year and it's still your Facebook Profile Pic, take it down. We might not fault you for doing it but we certainly don't want the world to see it.

Join wildlife rehab organizations and do the training. Some states have wildlife rehab organizations for their state, like New York state has the New York State Wildlife Rehab Council <https://nyswrc.org/> so if you live there, start there. Google your state and the words 'wildlife rehab' to see if you have anything like that in your area. That's a great place to start! Either way, you have some national and international options as well: The International Wildlife Rehab Council - IWRC- has a Basic Wildlife Rehab course that is amazing and will teach you a ton. You can find them at <https://theiwrc.org/> and see their course schedule there. The National Wildlife Rehab Association, NWRA, has online courses and an annual symposium with tons of classes. Join NWRA at <https://www.nrawildlife.org/> . The Wildlife Rehab Education Network, WREN, offers free classes every year and you can find out more at <https://www.wrencertified.org/>. There are also online courses available though Wildlife Center of Virginia at <https://www.wildlifecenter.org/wildlife-care-academy-course...> and Universal Class has a course at <https://www.universalclass.com/.../wildlife-rehabilitation-tr...> as well as Animal Behavior Institute at <https://www.animaledu.com/Programs/Wildlife-Rehabilitation> I also really love all of the FREE online info and class material at Lafeber Vet : <https://lafieber.com/vet/resources-education/>

GOOD LUCK!!! We hope that you'll find your way and become lifelong wildlife rehabbers like all of us.

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