

WILDLIFE REHABILITATION GUIDANCE

Welcome to the world of wildlife rehabilitation! Newly permitted wildlife rehabilitators are encouraged to volunteer, under a mentor, at a permitted wildlife rehabilitation facility before working on their own. Remember the primary goal of wildlife rehabilitation is to release the animals back into their natural habitat, enabling them to survive independently, without human intervention. Keeping non-releasable wildlife is not ideal and strict criteria must be met because the goal is to release wildlife and not keep them in captivity. Please read the following guidelines to help you with your endeavor.



**WILDLIFE
HEALTH
PROGRAM**

THE BASICS

This section provides a foundational understanding of wildlife rehabilitation, including the legal requirements, training expectations, and important federal protections. Before engaging in wildlife rehabilitation, it's essential to understand the regulations and responsibilities that come with this field.

KNOW YOUR LAWS

- **301 KAR 2:075** Wildlife Rehabilitation

Wildlife Rehabilitators must comply with both 301 KAR 2:075 and the **Standards of Wildlife Rehabilitation**.

Wildlife rehabilitators must submit an **annual report** and a **non-releasable wildlife report** each year to Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, detailing their activities from the previous year. This requirement applies even if they do not plan to renew for the following year.

INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REHABILITATION COURSE

Before becoming a permitted wildlife rehabilitator, individuals are required to complete the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council's (IWRC) course on Basic Wildlife Rehabilitation. Wildlife rehabilitators often encounter injured, sick, displaced, or orphaned animals in urgent need of medical attention. They must be able to recognize a wide range of conditions—such as shock, dehydration, broken bones, illness, and various wounds—and work closely with their Veterinarian of Record to ensure proper care is provided. Understanding when an animal is suffering and may not recover is also a crucial part of the role. While only a licensed veterinarian or licensed veterinarian technician can perform euthanasia, rehabilitators must be able to identify when it is necessary to prevent prolonged suffering.

Additionally, wildlife rehabilitators need to possess the knowledge and skills necessary to protect themselves from diseases that can be transmitted by wildlife. Without this course, many wildlife rehabilitators would not have the necessary skills or training to provide supportive care to these animals or protect themselves from potential harm. Veterinarians conducting wildlife rehabilitation do not need to take the IWRC course but must meet facility standards.

MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT

Migratory birds are federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). To rehabilitate these birds, both Kentucky and federal wildlife rehabilitation permits are required. Additionally:

- USFWS sub-permittees on a federal migratory bird rehabilitation permit must also obtain a state wildlife rehabilitation permit.
- Federal permits and sub-permittees must be filed with Kentucky Fish and Wildlife.
- All birds in Kentucky, except invasive species, are protected under MBTA, and game birds are further protected by state law.

Learn more on how to obtain a federal migratory bird rehabilitation permit from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

PROHIBITED SPECIES FOR WILDLIFE REHABILITATION

(1) A permit holder shall not rehabilitate or attempt to rehabilitate:

- a. Cougar (*Felis concolor*)
- b. Wolf (*Canis lupus* or *Canis rufus*)
- c. Elk (*Cervus elaphus*)
- d. Bear (*Ursus americanus*)
- e. Any species of terrestrial wildlife not native to Kentucky; or
- f. Prohibited species listed in **301 KAR 2:082 Section 4**

PROHIBITION OF REHABILITATION OF CERVIDS IN CWD SURVEILLANCE ZONES

- The rehabilitation of deer or any other cervid is prohibited within a **Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) Surveillance Zone**.
- Any cervid currently undergoing rehabilitation must be released, following the release requirements in 301 KAR 2:075, within the same county where rehabilitation occurred.
- If a CWD Surveillance Zone is established after rehabilitation begins, the animal must be released within 180 days, in the same county where it was rehabilitated.
- Non-releasable cervids are not permitted within a CWD Surveillance Zone.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This section explores the ethical challenges rehabilitators face, including the importance of minimizing human influence, making humane decisions, and understanding when intervention may cause more harm than good.

KEEP WILDLIFE WILD

Remember the wildlife in your care are patients, not pets. Wildlife rehabilitation permits do not confer ownership. Only handle wildlife when necessary to minimize stress and prevent habituation. Habituation should be avoided as it does not meet the criteria for non-releasable and often results in these animals being euthanized as they cannot be released for public safety concerns.

To ensure the well-being of wildlife in rehabilitation, animals must be housed in a quiet, low-stimulus environment, away from human activity. They must remain in secure enclosures at all times and are not permitted to roam freely within the facility or home. Additionally, domestic animals are not allowed in the rehabilitation area.

Only permitted wildlife rehabilitators shall handle or have any contact with wildlife. Allowing non-permitted individuals to engage in such actions is not only illegal, but it also stresses the animal, puts people at risk of bites, scratches, or disease, and can result in future permits being denied and current permits revoked.

Wildlife rehabilitators cannot simultaneously hold a captive wildlife permit or a captive cervid permit, nor can they transfer non-releasable wildlife to a captive wildlife permit. It is the responsibility of the wildlife rehabilitator to ensure, to the best of their ability, that animals are not habituated to humans.

Treating a wild animal as a pet violates 301 KAR 2:075. Wildlife rehabilitators who treat animals as pets risk losing their wildlife rehabilitation permit, as well as facing citations and the potential confiscation of the wildlife.

DO NOT CREATE NUISANCE WILDLIFE

Cities, towns, and subdivisions are typically unsuitable habitats for most wildlife species. When wild animals become habituated to human environments, they often turn into nuisances—causing property damage and leading homeowners to seek solutions to remove or manage them.



Photo: Adobe Stock

Unfortunately, habituated wildlife are often trapped and euthanized, and the cost of their removal can be significant. After investing time, effort, and resources into rehabilitation, losing these animals due to nuisance issues is both discouraging and counterproductive. Feeding wildlife after release contributes to this problem by fostering a dependence on humans, leading to unnatural and often problematic behaviors. This not only undermines the goals of wildlife rehabilitation but also increases the risk of disease transmission, overpopulation, and conflicts within communities as animals congregate around artificial food sources.

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia, derived from the Greek words *eu* *thanatos*, meaning “good death,” refers to the act of intentionally ending an animal’s life in a humane and painless manner to alleviate suffering. While this is often the most emotionally difficult aspect of wildlife rehabilitation, it is also one of the most important responsibilities a rehabilitator must accept. In many cases, euthanasia is the most compassionate option—especially when an animal is gravely injured, ill, or unable to survive in the wild without experiencing prolonged pain or distress.

Wildlife rehabilitators frequently encounter animals suffering from severe trauma, disease, or congenital issues that cannot be treated or would result in a poor quality of life. In these situations, prolonging the animal’s life may lead to unnecessary suffering, and humane euthanasia becomes the most ethical course of action. It’s important to remember that the ultimate goal of wildlife rehabilitation is not simply to keep animals alive, but to restore them to a state where they can live independently, free of pain, and thrive in their natural environment.

Only a licensed veterinarian or licensed veterinary technician may legally perform euthanasia using injectable DEA-controlled substances. However, it is the rehabilitator's responsibility to recognize when euthanasia may be necessary and consult their Veterinarian of Record. This decision requires a deep sense of compassion, responsibility, and a clear understanding of what is in the best interest of the animal.

If you are uncomfortable with the idea of euthanizing animals—even in situations where they are suffering with no chance of recovery—wildlife rehabilitation may not be the right field for you. The emotional weight of this role can be heavy, and it is essential to be prepared for the realities of making difficult decisions in the name of animal welfare.

ILLEGAL PETS

Wildlife rehabilitators can only accept wildlife that is injured, sick, displaced, or orphaned. Illegal pets do not fall into these categories and, therefore, cannot be accepted. Additionally, these animals are typically adults that have become habituated to humans and cannot survive on their own in the wild.

Wildlife rehabilitators are unable to keep habituated animals, as they do not meet the criteria for being non-releasable. If you come across illegal pets, it is important to report them to your **local game warden**.

Please note that if you accept illegal pets, you may be responsible for their euthanasia if they cannot be safely returned to the wild. Treating a wild animal as a pet not only compromises its rehabilitation but also violates 301 KAR 2:075. Wildlife rehabilitators who treat wild animals as pets risk losing their rehabilitation permit, receiving citations, and having the wildlife confiscated.

NON-RELEASABLE WILDLIFE

General

- Only *non-releasable animals* may be used for educational programs or public viewing.
- *Rabies Vector Species* (RVS) are an exception and may not be used.

Restrictions by Species

Rabies Vector Species (RVS):

- Wildlife rehabilitators may not possess RVS as non-releasable animals unless legally held outside the ERSZ before April 4, 2023.

Cervids (e.g., deer, elk)

- The rehabilitation of deer or any other cervid

is prohibited within a CWD Surveillance Zone.

- Any cervid currently undergoing rehabilitation must be released, following the release requirements in 301 KAR 2:075, within the same county where rehabilitation occurred.
- If a CWD Surveillance Zone is established after rehabilitation begins, the animal must be released within 180 days, in the same county where it was rehabilitated.
- Non-releasable cervids are not permitted in a CWD Surveillance Zone.

Criteria for Non-Releasable Status

- Injuries that may qualify an animal as non-releasable include:
 - Amputated leg
 - Vision loss
 - Impaired mobility
 - Other permanent conditions that would prevent survival in the wild
- A veterinarian must certify non-releasable status.
- Veterinarian documentation and an annual non-releasable wildlife report must be submitted.

Care Standards

- Non-releasable animals must be housed in enclosures that mimic their natural environment.
- They must not be treated as pets.
- Animals must not roam freely in your home or facility.

Ethical Consideration

In many cases, euthanasia is the most humane option for wildlife that cannot be safely released. If a life in captivity would compromise the animal's well-being—such as limiting its freedom to express normal behavior or exposing it to fear and distress—then euthanasia should be seriously considered. Animals should have sufficient space, appropriate facilities, and, when suitable, the company of their own kind, while also being free from conditions that cause mental suffering.

RELEASE CONSIDERATIONS

Wildlife must be released immediately upon recovery from injury or illness, or upon reaching the appropriate age to survive on its own. Wildlife shall not remain in rehabilitation for more than 180 days, except in cases where an exemption has been granted by the USFWS for migratory birds. Any such exemption documentation from USFWS must be submitted to Kentucky Fish and Wildlife when renewing your rehabilitation permit.

MEDICAL PROCEDURES

Wildlife should only be treated for injuries or illnesses that are essential to their survival. Spaying or neutering a wild animal can inhibit its ability to reproduce, affecting the overall health of the population by preventing the passing on of important genetics.

Additionally, vaccines for wildlife are often unnecessary and can be costly, with follow-up doses typically required a year after the initial vaccination. Since these vaccines are off-label, they must be administered by a veterinarian. However, it's important to note that if an animal that has been vaccinated bites a person or develops a disease, the vaccine will not prevent the animal from being euthanized for public safety reasons. Therefore, we do not recommend vaccines that are not labeled specifically for use in wildlife.

Once an animal has recovered, it must be immediately released back into the wild. It is illegal to keep a rehabilitated animal solely for the purpose of administering follow-up vaccinations.

REUNITING YOUNG WILDLIFE

Each year, the challenge of providing care for large numbers of healthy, abandoned young animals places a significant strain on wildlife rehabilitators. Ideally, these animals should be reunited with their parents as quickly as possible. While rehabilitators do an excellent job caring for wildlife, the advantages of growing up in the wild with natural parental care can never truly be replicated.

Reuniting healthy juveniles within the first 24 hours offers the highest chance of success. During this time, parents are typically still searching for their lost young and can often find them quickly. In contrast, animals that are truly orphaned are usually not healthy, having been left to fend for themselves without proper care.

Sometimes, young animals are found alone,

with no visible nest or den nearby. Well-meaning finders may mistakenly believe these animals need help. If you receive a call from a concerned citizen and the animal appears healthy, assess the situation carefully. If appropriate, advise them to return the animal to the exact location where it was found and leave the area to allow the parents to return.

INTENTIONAL OBSTRUCTION OF LAWFUL TAKE OF WILDLIFE

Wildlife rehabilitators who attempt to or stop a hunter or trapper from harvesting an animal shall be cited, have their wildlife rehabilitation revoked, and the wildlife confiscated.

Just like you, hunters and trappers are a vital part of wildlife conservation. The purchase of hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses directly funds the protection and conservation of wildlife and their habitats. Thanks to the support of sportsmen and women, many wildlife populations in Kentucky have made large comebacks. Without this funding, many species would lose the protection they need. It is important to note that interfering with hunting and trapping activities is illegal, including removing nuisance wildlife from traps.

KRS 150.710

- (1) No person shall intentionally obstruct or disrupt the right of a person to lawfully take wildlife by hunting, trapping, or fishing.
- (2) The Attorney General or any person directly affected may bring an action to restrain conduct unlawful under this section and may bring an action to recover damages.
- (3) The officers of the Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, or any other peace officer, police officer, state police officer, or sheriff may enforce this section.
- (4) This section shall not apply to incidental interference with the taking of wildlife by hunting, trapping, or fishing caused by lawful activities including, but not limited to, farming, mining, or recreation.

ENCLOSURE AND FACILITY REQUIREMENTS

ENCLOSURES

Do not house prey and predators adjacent to each other as this creates a stressful situation that inhibits healing. As an animal progresses through the rehabilitation process, the animal should be moved from the indoor enclosure to the outdoor enclosure. Outdoor enclosures help condition the animal for survival in the wild and reduce the chance of habituation. Regardless of species or age, wildlife rehabilitators are required to meet the minimum size standards for both indoor and outdoor enclosures. For more information, read the [Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation](#).



Photo: Adobe Stock

FACILITY INSPECTION

A Game Warden will **inspect your facility** annually. Facility inspection requirements are based on the **Standards of Wildlife Rehabilitation**.

Requirements:

1. Veterinarian support
2. Separate refrigeration from human food for animal food, carcasses, and postmortem specimens.
3. Adequate medical supplies such as disposable gloves and personal protective equipment.
4. Domestic animals must not have direct contact or exposure to wildlife.
5. Facility must have both indoor and outdoor enclosures of appropriate size, made from appropriate materials, for all species and ages of wildlife you expect to treat.
6. Indoor wildlife enclosures must be placed away from human disturbance and located in a quiet area with minimal visual stimuli.
7. Wildlife must be contained in enclosures and cannot be loose in the facility.
8. Outdoor enclosures must have a roofed portion, nest box, or other means of protection from inclement weather, yet still allow the animal to be conditioned for survival in the wild.
9. Wildlife enclosures must provide sufficient shelter from overheating, excessive rain, snow, or cold temperatures.
10. Food and bedding must be stored in a manner to protect from spoilage, infestation, and contamination.
11. Facility and animal enclosures must be kept reasonably clean to prevent disease transmission between wildlife and humans.
12. Facility must have potable water and electricity.
13. The natural history and behavior of the animal must be considered in enclosure design so the animal can relearn basic behaviors of that species.
14. Outdoor enclosures must be surrounded by a fence or placed out of view of the general public to avoid habituation to humans.
15. Must not have been convicted of a wildlife violation or KRS 150 or had a permit denied or revoked within the last year.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Wildlife can carry diseases that pose risks to both humans and other animals. This section highlights key zoonotic diseases, such as rabies and raccoon roundworm, and offers guidance on protecting yourself, your team, and immune-compromised individuals.

DISEASE TRANSMISSION

It is important to understand the disease risks associated with each species you work with. Diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans are known as zoonotic diseases. Because wildlife rehabilitators often have close contact with potentially infected animals, their risk of exposure is higher. Zoonotic diseases of concern include, but are not limited to:

- [Anaplasmosis](#)
- [Anthrax](#)
- [Arbovirus encephalitis](#)
- [Babesiosis](#)
- [Baylisascaris procyonis](#)
- [Bovine tuberculosis](#)
- [Brucellosis](#)
- [Campylobacteriosis](#)
- [Cryptosporidiosis](#)
- [Echinococcus multilocularis](#)
- [Giardiasis](#)
- [Hantavirus](#)
- [Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza](#)
- [Histoplasmosis](#)
- [Leptospirosis](#)
- [Lyme Disease](#)
- [Plague](#)
- [Psittacosis](#)
- [Q Fever](#)
- [Rabies](#)
- [Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever](#)
- [Salmonellosis](#)
- [Spirochaetal Relapsing Fever](#)
- [Toxoplasmosis](#)
- [Tularemia](#)
- [West Nile Virus](#)

IMMUNE-COMPROMISED INDIVIDUALS

Individuals with medical conditions that suppress their immune system are at greater risk of contracting zoonotic diseases from wildlife. This includes, but is not limited to, those with autoimmune diseases and individuals undergoing cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy. These individuals should avoid participating in wildlife rehabilitation and should not be present at wildlife rehabilitation facilities. These individuals should also avoid contact with wildlife or any contaminated materials. If you have concerns about a potential zoonotic disease outbreak, please contact the Wildlife Health Program at wildlifehealth@ky.gov.

RACCOON ROUNDWORM

Raccoon roundworm is a parasitic intestinal infection caused by *Baylisascaris* worms. People typically acquire the infection by accidentally consuming infectious eggs. While the risk of infection is low for the general public, certain groups, such as wildlife rehabilitators, face a higher risk. This is because wildlife rehabilitators have frequent contact with raccoons, which are the primary natural reservoir for the parasite. Children are also at greater risk due to their behavior, often putting contaminated fingers, soil, or objects in their mouths.

This roundworm can infect not only humans but also a variety of other animals, including dogs. Infections can be severe if the parasite migrates to the eyes, organs, or brain. Roundworm eggs on surfaces are particularly resilient and can only be destroyed by boiling water or a propane flame gun.

Infections can be severe in people if the parasite migrates to the eyes, organs, or brain. Roundworm eggs on surfaces are particularly resilient and can only be destroyed by boiling water or a propane flame gun.

Symptoms in Humans

- Nausea
- Tiredness
- Liver enlargement
- Loss of coordination
- Lack of attention to people and surroundings
- Loss of muscle control
- Blindness
- Coma

Prevention

Raccoon feces that has just been deposited does not contain infectious eggs. The eggs take at least 2-4 weeks to become infective, so promptly removing and properly disposing of raccoon feces can help reduce the risk of exposure. For comprehensive guidelines on cleaning indoor and outdoor latrines, refer to the CDC's [**cleaning and decontamination recommendations**](#).

RABIES

Rabies is a viral disease most commonly transmitted through the bite or scratch of an infected animal, contact with contaminated saliva, or exposure to neural tissue. Once symptoms appear, rabies is untreatable and almost always fatal.

All mammals are potential rabies hosts, but certain species are more frequently infected. These are collectively known as Rabies Vector Species (RVS) and include raccoons, red and gray foxes, coyotes, spotted and striped skunks, and any hybrids of these species. Bats are also significant carriers.

Anyone working with mammals—especially RVS—must follow strict safety protocols, including:

- Using personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Receiving pre-exposure rabies vaccinations
- Undergoing specialized training for handling RVS

Important Guidelines for Handling RVS:

- RVS should never come into contact with the public or individuals who are not permitted wildlife rehabilitators.
- If a person is potentially exposed to a rabid animal, observation is not sufficient—by law, the animal must be tested for rabies via microscopic examination of its brain tissue, which can only be performed post-mortem.
- Any RVS showing neurological symptoms should be immediately considered a rabies suspect.
- All bites or potential exposures must be reported to your **county public health office**—this is a legal requirement.

Summary of PPE Recommendations:

- Wear protective gloves, eye protection, and face shields when handling any wild mammals.
- Ensure up-to-date pre-exposure rabies vaccinations.
- Follow decontamination procedures after each contact with an animal, especially RVS.



Photo: Adobe Stock

PRE-EXPOSURE RABIES VACCINATIONS

All wildlife rehabilitators treating mammals are encouraged to obtain a pre-exposure rabies vaccination and be knowledgeable in the proper handling of these species. Any bites from an RVS should be reported to the public health department. Animals suspected of having rabies that are to be tested should be frozen immediately following death or euthanasia if they cannot be submitted to the lab within 24 hours of exposure.

301 KAR 2:075. Wildlife Rehabilitation Permit

Section 8. Rabies Exposure.

- (1) If a mammal bites a person, or a mammal shows symptoms of a rabies infection, the animal shall be dispatched in a manner so as to preserve the brain intact and the animal's head shall be submitted for testing immediately to a laboratory approved by the Secretary for Health and Family Services to be tested for rabies, as established in 902 KAR 2:070, Section 5 and KRS 258.085(1)(c).
- (2) Department staff shall confiscate and dispatch any wild mammal that bites a person or shows symptoms of a rabies infection.

902 KAR 2:070. Department for Public Health.

Section 5. Destroying an Animal Exhibiting Positive Signs of Rabies

Wild animals suspected of rabies shall be sacrificed and their heads submitted to the laboratory immediately.

KRS 258.085 Animal Control and Protection

Quarantine of animals suspected of having rabies -- Destruction of animal in lieu of quarantine --

(c) If a wild or exotic animal bites a human being or exhibits symptoms of rabies, that animal shall be destroyed and tested for rabies. Quarantine is not an option in most cases; it is typically reserved only for rare or endangered species, usually within accredited zoo settings.

HIGHLY PATHOGENIC AVIAN INFLUENZA

Avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu, is a viral infection primarily affecting birds. It is caused by influenza type A viruses found naturally in wild birds worldwide. These viruses can spread to domestic poultry like chickens, ducks, and turkeys, as well as to mammals, including humans.

Avian influenza viruses are categorized as low pathogenic (LPAI) or highly pathogenic (HPAI) based on the severity of illness they cause. HPAI viruses can lead to severe symptoms including respiratory issues, swimming in circles, incoordination, droopy wings, lethargy, reluctance to fly, and head tremors. HPAI causes high mortality in chickens, turkeys, and ducks. Infected birds spread influenza through saliva, mucus, and feces. While the risk to humans is low, infection can occur through inhalation or exposure to eyes, nose, or mouth.

DISEASE PREVENTION

Personal Protective Equipment

- Wear appropriate PPE such as gloves, face masks, and goggles when handling birds or other wildlife suspected of carrying avian influenza.
- Use disposable gloves and change them frequently, especially between handling different animals or between tasks.

Hand Hygiene

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before and after handling animals, as well as after removing gloves.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers if soap and water are not available.

Preventative Measures

- Implement biosecurity measures, including the use of foot baths at entrances to enclosures to prevent the mechanical spread of disease on footwear.
- Quarantine new arrivals to monitor for signs of illness before introducing them to the general population.
- Although no specific vaccine is available for HPAI, wildlife rehabilitation workers should stay informed about any relevant vaccines or preventative measures recommended for those working closely with birds. Speak to a healthcare provider for further information.



Environmental Hygiene

- Regularly clean and disinfect cages, equipment, and surfaces using appropriate disinfectants. Common disinfectants that are effective in killing avian influenza viruses include Pine-Sol, Accel or Rescue, or a bleach solution of 1/2 cup bleach to one gallon of water. Learn more about cleaning and disinfecting practices.
- Maintain good ventilation in indoor facilities to reduce the risk of airborne transmission.

Training and Education

- Ensure that all staff and volunteers receive adequate training on HPAI prevention and response protocols.
- Stay updated on current guidelines and recommendations from public health authorities and Kentucky Fish and Wildlife.

Monitoring for Symptoms

- Be vigilant for any signs of illness in wildlife and people.
- Seek medical attention promptly if any symptoms develop and inform healthcare providers about potential exposures to HPAI.

Reporting

- **Report** suspected cases of HPAI in birds and mammals to the Wildlife Health Program.



WILDLIFE HEALTH PROGRAM

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