



Wild Animals As Pets

Implications for the people and animals involved.

Volunteers for Wildlife receives many inquiries each year as to whether wild animals can be kept as pets. We also receive many animals each year that have been illegally kept in captivity.

Very often, these animals have developed lifelong health and behavior problems as a result of being kept in unsuitable conditions and being fed an improper diet.

Simply put, **wild animals should not be kept as pets.** Laws may vary by state and region, but it is very often illegal to keep wild animals in captivity.

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Birds

Migratory birds - generally speaking, all native species of birds in the US - are federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This act makes it a federal offense (unless otherwise permitted by regulations) to capture, kill, possess, or sell a wild bird, in addition to wild bird nests, eggs, and feathers. Fines for misdemeanor convictions under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act may be up to \$15,000. Our wildlife rehabilitation center has a series of permits that enable us to rehabilitate wild birds and keep permanent animals for educational purposes. Providing wild birds with an inadequate diet in captivity, especially as they are growing, can result in debilitating health problems that can ultimately be fatal.

Mammals

It is often tempting to keep a baby mammal that you have found, but even the most docile baby will not remain that way once it is grown up. Adult mammals typically become aggressive, destructive, and are difficult to handle as adults. The possibility of being bitten is not to be taken lightly.

Should the animal require medical care, it would be difficult or perhaps impossible to locate a veterinarian who would be knowledgeable about their care and willing to treat them. The risk of parasite or disease transmission from a wild mammal is significant not only to yourself, but to your pets as well. New York State prohibits private ownership of exotic animals without an appropriate permit from the Department of Environmental Conservation. Laws may vary by state, but the risks of keeping a wild mammal as a pet are universal. Here are links to several websites on the topic of wild animals as pets:

The Humane Society of the United States:

http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/should_wild_animals_be_kept_as_pets.html

University of Minnesota: Wildlife as Pets:

<http://www.tc.umn.edu/%7Edevo0028/wildpets.htm>

University of Minnesota: Diseases Transmitted by Wild Animals:

<http://www.tc.umn.edu/%7Edevo0028/zoonos.htm>

Reptiles & Amphibians

As previously stated, laws regarding keeping wild-caught reptiles in captivity vary by state. This article:

<http://www.kingsnake.com/ballpythonguide/pets.htm>

by Dana Payne, a keeper at the Woodland Park Zoo, provides a thorough discussion of the risks of keeping wild-caught reptiles as pets. An excerpt from the article states: "Taking native reptiles and amphibians from the wild for pets is a very traditional thing to do, but may or may not be appropriate, depending on the status of the wild populations in your area, and for some species may also be prohibited by state or federal law. Development and habitat

destruction, pollution, human disturbance, and predation by cats, dogs, and children have already severely impacted many visible reptile and amphibian populations."



The Eastern Box Turtle in the pictures above was kept illegally as a pet. She was fed an improper diet and now her shell has become deformed. The condition induced by improper diet and care is called Metabolic Bone Disease. The shell is made of bone under the protective scales. Metabolic Bone Disease causes the bone to become soft due to calcium and other vitamin deficiencies. The turtle's shell cannot grow properly under these conditions. This turtle will not be able to protect herself from predators because she cannot close her shell properly.

Red-eared Sliders on Long Island

A popular pet turtle sold at pet shops and street vendors is the water turtle called the Red-eared Slider. These turtles are very cute when they are babies and many purchase them to keep in a 10-gallon tank in their home. However, these turtles can live 40 years or more and can reach sizes of up to 11 inches (measured on the shell from head to tail). Once they reach an adult size they need a pond or other large tank to live in. Many do not have the space for such a set-up and think their pet turtle would be better off in a pond in a park. However, these turtles are not native to Long Island.

Now these turtles are proliferating as more and more pet turtles are dumped. They are squeezing the Eastern Painted Turtles (L.I.'s native water turtle) out of their habitat.

Releasing Pets into the Wild

If you can no longer care for your pet, releasing it into the wild is not a responsible solution to your problem. Shelters and rescue groups exist for all types of animals (see websites below). The majority of released pets cannot be expected to survive on their own in the wild. They will be subject to starvation, predation, lack of shelter, extremes of heat and cold, and internal & external parasites, to name a few.

In the event a released pet is able to survive in the wild, it may introduce diseases and compete for resources with already-struggling populations of native animals.



The bunny shown here was a pet released into the wild to fend for himself. He was lucky enough to be found and brought to our hospital, but not before he lost weight to the point of emaciation, and became infested with fleas and coccidia. He also developed a serious infection in his foot, which was painful and required months of medication to treat. Please do not let your pet suffer this way in the wild.

Domestic Animal Shelters, Rescues, and Adoption Groups

Long Island & NYC

- Long Island Cat Project
http://www.licp.org/adoption_services.html
- Long Island Parrot Society
<http://www.liparrotsociety.org/>
- Parrot Rescue, Inc.
<http://www.parrotrescue.org/>
- New York Bird Club & Forum
<http://www.manhattanbirdclub.com/>
<http://www.websitetoolbox.com/tool/mb/luciedove>
- Turtle Rescue of Long Island
<http://turtlerescues.org>
- Rabbit Rescue & Rehab
<http://www.rabbitcare.org/placing-your-rabbit.htm>

Nationwide Links & Directories

- No-Kill Dog & Cat Shelters
<http://www.saveourstrays.com/no-kill.htm>
- Parrot Rescue & Sanctuary Links
<http://www.parrotrescue.org/links.htm>
- Reptile Societies & Rescues
<http://www.anapsid.org/societies/>
- Rabbit Rescue & Adoption Links
<http://www.rabbit.org/adoption/index.html>
- Ferret Rescues & Shelters
<http://www.ferret.org/links/shelters.shtm>

Raising Wild Animals Yourself

Volunteers for Wildlife receives many inquiries in regards to raising wild animals at home. The sections above describe that this may be illegal in some areas, but let's put that aside for the moment. Wild animals - including baby birds, rabbits, opossums, squirrels, and turtles - have specific nutritional needs that vary as they grow. Wildlife rehabilitators are trained to care for these animals properly at every stage of their lives. Please let them do their job, and ensure the animal you have found will have the best chance at a healthy life.

Birds in particular can be very difficult to raise properly without appropriate knowledge of their care. Our wild birds are given diets that we make ourselves. **There is no commercially available baby bird hand-feeding formula that is adequate for every life stage, or every species, of wild birds.** Hand-feeding formulas designed for parrots are not appropriate for wild songbirds, do not be fooled by what the package may claim! An inadequate diet may result in crippling bone deformities, as well as improper feather growth.



The photo above shows an example of poor feather development that occurred as a result of a bird being fed an inadequate diet as a baby. Even if you don't know a thing about birds, you can probably tell that something does not look right! The feathers are thin, brittle, and breaking apart. Also, there is no coloration in the middle of those feathers due to a nutrient deficiency. Of course, a bird cannot fly with feathers like this. If you have found a bird and cannot bring it to a rehabilitator immediately, contact us and we can explain how to prepare a simple short-term hand-feeding formula.

The Robin in the next picture was found as a nestling and kept by a well-intentioned person who thought they were doing the right thing. They looked online for a proper diet to feed the young bird and kept it until

it was able to fly. Unfortunately, not all websites give out valid information and they did not check with a licensed rehabilitator. The diet turned out to be incorrect and the bird developed feather problems. The first picture is just after the bird was admitted to our wildlife hospital. The second picture shows the Robin after weeks of rehabilitation and a proper diet. Notice the feathers on the head and wings.



A FINAL WORD

This page:

http://www.api4animals.org/b4a2_exotic_animals_summary.php

outlines the laws regarding keeping exotic & wild animals in captivity state-by-state.

Volunteers for Wildlife is available to answer your questions about wildlife. Call our Wildlife Advisory Telephone Network at **(631) 423-0982**.

Volunteers for Wildlife is a non-profit charitable organization formed to help distressed wildlife on Long Island. The organization operates Long Island's only fully equipped and staffed Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Center. Our work is made possible by concerned people like you. If you would like to support the continuation of our work, please send a contribution to Volunteers for Wildlife, 27 Lloyd Harbor Road, Huntington, New York 11743. Individual membership starts at \$25.00.