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Standards, Oh My!

The idea of self-setting guidelines and standards in a field primarily of volunteers is perhaps a difficult one for some folks to grasp. We have no governing board that can dis-bar or de-frock or pull someone's permit to practice wildlife rehabilitation as do the legal, spiritual, and medical communities. What we do have are regulations that vary enormously from state to state or country to country, two different professional associations, and permit requirements laid out by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for those in the U.S. working with migratory birds or threatened and endangered species. However, it was clear twenty years ago that if we didn't establish professional standards for ourselves, the regulatory agencies would do it for us.

In my opinion, the *Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation*, 3rd edition, 2000, edited by Dr. Erica Miller is one of the most useful and far-reaching documents to come out in this field in a very long time. Useful both because of what it covers (way more than simply cage sizes) and because it truly represents the thoughts, experience, and practices of many different people. Anyone who had an opinion on any aspect of the previous edition was invited to submit that opinion—and it was reviewed by a large group of peers. And far-reaching because it is now referenced in U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service standard conditions and proposed to be referenced in the new subpart under Title 50 CFR 21 regulations as being the guidelines, at least for cage sizes, for rehabilitating birds; because many state wildlife agencies are also referencing it, for all species; and because it has been at least reviewed by other countries in consideration of their own regulations. Its being referenced in the Standard Conditions first attached to federal rehabilitation permits in 1998, in fact, is what gave rise to the most recent effort to update it.

All three editions of the Minimum Standards booklet were developed and published jointly by IWRC and NWR. Starting in the 1980s, the organizations decided to bring together rehabilitators experienced with different species in order to combine that experience into a single document that would represent both solid standards of housing and care, and goals that would be attainable by

rehabilitators. The standards committees of both organizations were reconvened in the early 1990s to fix some errors and oversights, and incorporate some changes. The original document and all revisions were approved separately by both boards.

Underlying the original effort in the 1980s was the fact that few states had detailed wildlife rehabilitation regulations and that it would thus fall to the national organizations (i.e., rehabilitators themselves) to self-regulate. Although NWR fairly early on abandoned the idea of accreditation based on these standards, IWRC did initiate a pilot program in California, with funding from the state, to certify interested organizations. However, in the absence of funding, the costs of the program were high and the benefits of such a certification were not clear cut—especially as many state agencies did move to revise and improve their internal regulations as public awareness of wildlife rehabilitation rose. The Minimum Standards booklets included a self-check list for both centers and home care rehabilitators or out-shelter networks to assist them in evaluating their facilities, either in the simple desire to improve or in connection with a proposed accreditation.

Remembering that both national organizations share the mission of facilitating the continued improvement of wildlife rehabilitation, any rehabilitator dedicated to the care of wildlife, it seems to me, whether from a large center or a small home care facility (where most of the large centers started), has an interest in improved self-regulation.

And the best way to be sure you are represented in any process affecting your practice of wildlife rehabilitation is to share your input. Come to conferences, submit comments and opinions when the opportunity arises, share your experience! Our field is changing and growing in professionalism—the communication tools of e-mail and the Internet have made it possible for new information to reach all parts of the globe within minutes. We urge everyone to network on this level. The animals we serve can only benefit.

—Louise Shimmel
Board Member, IWRC
Director, Cascades Raptor Center,
Eugene, Oregon

On Pests and Cats, “Light” Foods, MacDiet

Certain birds, such as starlings and perhaps sparrows and pigeons, are considered pest and a threat to some of our native wildlife. They certainly are considered a problem by some people. Hawks have been reintroduced to keep control over these critters, but what about the cat? I know of a farm that had a great deal of cats to keep the rat and mice population down, and it was effective. Birds that are considered pest are excessive in numbers. I believe the cat is as necessary to their control as the hawk. I rehabilitate birds that are considered good or pest. I pass no judgement. I rehabilitated two mallard ducks since they were chicks and released them three months later. I almost cried because I knew I was releasing them to possible destruction by a hawk. I felt like a parent to these ducks—but I also love the hawk. A rehabber has to be impartial and realistic. I hope my two mallards will never be killed, but I also hope that the hawk finds one if it is to survive, as long as it is not one of my mallards.

The writer raises a number of topics that seem to be related to the spaying of cats and the related issue of feral cat feeding programs. These are both legitimate, ongoing problems. The IWRC believes that responsible rehabilitators need to keep in mind the following:

1. Cats, as “pets gone wild,” are still domestic animals and require the care and nurture of people to function best as they were bred (not “evolved”) to do.

2. Feral cats overpopulate neighborhoods, leading to transmission of cat diseases and fighting with pets; depredation of all the small native prey available (birds, reptiles, and mammals); and starvation among the cats themselves. The cats are also subject to being preyed upon by other cats, coyotes, owls, and people. Spaying and neutering begins to address the problem of the growing feral cat population.

3. Cats choose prey that presents itself, not other “pest” species. “Pest,” after all is in the mind of the beholder, and usually refers to the species in overabundance that brings itself to the attention of people.

—The Editors

I’ve heard that some people use “light” cat food in their nestling songbird food. They say that it “dilutes the fat” of other components in their mix. Is there any problem with using “light” cat food?

Yes, there is a problem. “Light” pet foods contain added cellulose from a plant source such as beet meal or even peanut shells. Cellulose is indigestible to cats, dogs, and songbirds. It is added to be filling but provide no calories.

One popular light food is comprised of 38.1% protein (some from corn), 31.5% carbohydrates, and 9.5% fat. Nearly two-thirds of the carbohydrates come from powdered cellulose.

Given that young birds do not have the ability to digest carbohydrates or cellulose, almost half of this food offers the birds nothing.

That is exactly the opposite of what young birds need. Nestling passerines require that every gram of their food be highly nutritious. Cellulose dilutes the nutritional value of the food and, if the light food is a significant fraction of the diet, it can interfere with the absorption of other nutrients. Because of the presence of corn and cellulose, this food contains approximately half the levels of protein and fat that birds require.

Nestling songbirds are true carnivores—they require an animal-based diet, just as kittens do. “Light” adult cat food is unsuitable for kittens, and they may not even be able to survive on it. Young songbirds require a diet of even higher quality than do kittens, since birds grow faster. The use of “light” food is essentially including shredded newspaper in the diet, and it is not in the best interest of either kittens or songbirds.

—Astrid MacLeod and Janine Perlman
“Food for Thought” columnists

This summer, our center switched from a dog-food-based passerine nestling diet to MacDiet. We’ve been feeding the babies as we always have, but they sometimes have diarrhea. Are we doing something wrong?

Assuming that your hygienic practices are fine, you may be overfeeding MacDiet. Less nutritious diets have a lot of indigestible components (that are not “bioavailable”), and you may be used to filling the crop often because the birds are chronically hungry. It’s similar to being on a diet of salad—you may eat a lot of it often and never feel satisfied. If you watch songbirds feed their young in the wild, they rarely fill the crop. Instead, relatively small meals of highly digestible food (insects) are fed. MacDiet approximates the bioavailability of insects, so smaller amounts should be fed, or the bird may develop diarrhea from overfeeding.

—Astrid MacLeod and Janine Perlman
“Food for Thought” columnists

The Editors encourage readers to respond to the articles, columns, and other items featured in the Journal of Wildlife Rehabilitation. Please direct general questions and comments to the Editor at runmuki@aol.com (USPS address on the journal’s inside back cover). To respond to a specific article or column, please contact the author directly. Those letters that seem most beneficial to the greatest number of readers will be included in our new Letters pages. (NOTE: Letters may be edited for clarity and length.)

NEO-REHABILISMS...

lactated stringers
volunteers who have been
milked dry

meatabolic bone disease
what results when you feed a
BOP hamburger

paraslite
an insult to the immune system