COMMON CASUALTIES ENCOUNTERED IN A WILDLIFE HOSPITAL: PART ONE

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Monica Guerrero-Mendez discusses, in the first of a two-part article, the types of wildlife presentations that are often found, and explains treatment methodologies

THE vast majority of wildlife patients taken into care are the victims of some form of trauma.

Most of the time, their obvious injuries attract the public’s attention while the real life-threatening conditions are unseen, but already in progress, as a result of the trauma (such as dehydration or shock). These unseen injuries are often overlooked, but they must be countered before any attempt to deal with the other injuries is made.

Wild casualty cases may be of a similar structure to companion animals, but their individual demands are completely different with regards to care and treatment.

All wildlife casualties will require a thorough examination and treatment, but they can be categorised as:

• a non-life-threatening condition requiring only routine first aid treatment, such as an orphaned baby bird;

• injured and not in a lifethreatening condition, but requiring first aid, stabilisation, pain relief and radiographs to enable the animal to be assessed fully (candidates for euthanasia fall into this category); and
in a life-threatening condition demanding emergency life-saving measures.

Stages

The stages to follow while dealing with wildlife casualties are as follows.

• Keep good records of where the animal was initially discovered. These should be kept with the case notes, allowing the animal to be later released where it was found. Care during capture and transportation are of paramount importance when the casualty is taken into captivity.

• Try to compile a good clinical history.

• Perform examinations and assessments for rehabilitation. At this point, two options present themselves:

  – Perform euthanasia on humane grounds.

  – Provide initial supportive treatment. After this, re-examine the patient. If no improvement is observed, euthanasia might be considered.

However, if the patient is improving, the rehabilitation process can start. The term “rehabilitation” is often used to describe the steps in treating and returning a casualty back to the wild. At each stage, the casualty needs to be monitored and its condition and progress assessed. The accuracy of this assessment has an important effect on the welfare of the animal and, ideally, should be made by a veterinarian. On welfare grounds, euthanasia must be an option if at any stage it is considered that the treatment is causing excessive distress or if it is apparent that the casualty cannot be returned to the wild safely.

Common reasons for wildlife casualties to be presented in general practice include:

• young that are found orphaned or abandoned;

• road traffic accidents;

• cat or dog attacks;

• disease (such as myxomatosis in rabbits);

• general injury (such as broken wings);

• oiled casualties;
• pollution;

• poisoning; and

• entrapments on fishing hooks or lines.

Common casualties and injuries

• Garden birds

Small birds regularly visit gardens to feed or nest. The more common species seen include wrens, goldcrests, blue tits, sparrows, finches, buntings, wagtails, blackbirds, thrushes, warbles, hirundines, starlings and woodpeckers. Common incidents reported are as follows.

– Cat attack lacerations: garden birds are commonly attacked by cats (Figure 1). Most of the wounds will heal spontaneously, but larger and deeper wounds may require suturing under general anaesthesia.

– Getting caught in string or fruit netting: affected individuals should be kept in captivity for a week to monitor for any pressure necrosis.

– Fractures: these are commonly reported in blackbirds and robins presented with broken beaks, legs or wings. Fractures in small patients always have a poor prognosis and euthanasia should be considered if the patient cannot be returned to the wild as 100 per cent functional.

• Waterfowl

These include ducks and swans. Commonly reported incidents are detailed below.

– Fishing hooks and line: ducks and swans are often injured by anglers’ discarded fishing tackle (Figures 2 and 3). Hooks can be barbed or barbless. The latter can be easy to remove. However, to assess the extent of a barbed hook’s effect, radiographic examination is often required. Surgery is often needed to remove these.

– Road traffic accidents: during the mating season, ducks will travel away from their normal waterside haunts to find a suitable nest site. They will often cross roads and may get hit by vehicles.

– Beak fractures: ducks and swans occasionally fracture or lose their beaks. Fractures in the bony mandible can be amended with wire sutures. When the bottom beak is involved, the prognosis is poor. However, bottom beak prostheses have been fitted in ducks successfully, but only if they are not to be released into the wild.
– Overhead wires: incidents of swans flying into overhead cables are common. Injuries can be severe, and include fractured legs or wings, major lacerations, burns and damage to the face and neck.

– Crash landings: swans often mistake wet icy roads for safe landing sites or water, causing themselves minor injuries and bruises that will resolve within a few days.

• Red foxes

Red foxes are the only canids that are native and resident in Britain. Commonly reported incidents are shown below.

– Fences and snares: a fox will often be found caught in a fence or a snare (still legal in Britain Figure 4). Both fences and snares can be cut with fencing pliers, but the fox should not be released until it has been monitored for several days in case pressure necrosis develops at the injury site.

– Poisoning: it is illegal to poison foxes, but it sometimes still happens. If a case of poisoning is suspected, DEFRA’s wildlife incident unit should be informed.

– Fractures: these are related to road traffic accidents (Figure 5) and normally involve the long bones of the legs, the pelvis and the spine. Long-bone fractures can be treated in the same manner as dogs, but foxes will normally not tolerate a leg cast. Pelvic fractures usually respond to cage rest, although vixens may need to be neutered before they are released if the pelvic canal is compromised. Amputating a hindleg may be an option. However, a fox could not cope with the loss of a front leg since the front legs are used to dig. If a fox cannot dig, it would be deprived of its normal behaviour.

• Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs are the mammals most often in need of rescue and rehabilitation.

Hedgehogs follow a nocturnal lifestyle and hibernate during cold winters. These animals often visit gardens, where they feed on beetles, worms and other invertebrates. Incidents that are commonly reported are detailed below.

– Road traffic accidents: most hedgehogs are killed, but those that survive usually present with injuries to the legs and head.

– Dog attacks: such incidents result in major skin wounds, snout damage or jaw fractures. The latter can be repaired by using wiring.

– Poisoning: this usually occurs after the animal ingests slug pellets, which contain metaldehyde.
No antidote is available. Some hedgehogs may pass blue/green faeces due to the dye in the slug pellets. Poisoning after ingesting weedkiller and car battery acid has also been reported.

– Fractures: these include leg, jaw and spinal fractures. Simple leg fractures can be stabilised using old-fashioned plaster of Paris casts. Hedgehogs that are suffering from spinal fractures should be humanely destroyed by euthanasia.

– Fly strike: these cases are commonly reported during the summer months. The evidence may be in the form of eggs or larvae, from fresh hatches up to full-grown maggots. Fly strike can kill the hedgehog unless this is controlled. Ivermectin is the drug of choice to treat fly strike. Broad-spectrum antibiotics, such as long-acting amoxicillin, should also be administered.

– Ongoing disease: debilitated hedgehogs showing ongoing disease, such as lungworm infestation, pneumonia, ringworm and mange, or those less than 70g, must not be hibernated. In the UK, the hibernation period is typically January to March, but in cold winters it may start earlier.

– Orphans: hedgehog litters may be born between March and October. If nests are disturbed, the mother will often abandon her young or eat them. The mother may also be killed crossing roads. Abandoned hoglets often make a whistling or peeping sound. All rescued orphans should be thoroughly checked for fly strike and first aid should be provided.

• Deer

Species regularly seen include fallow, roe, muntjac and Chinese water deer. Commonly reported incidents are detailed below.

– Fractures and luxations: road traffic accidents are the main cause of injury to deer. The legs, pelvis and spine are frequently fractured. Leg fractures are often compound and should, if possible, be temporarily splinted at the scene of any incident. Pelvis or spinal fractures need to be evaluated by a veterinarian. Does with constriction of the birth canal after a pelvis fracture should be neutered before release.

• Badgers

These are the largest and most numerous of Britain’s mustelids. Badgers are powerful omnivorous mammals. Their diet mainly consists of earthworms and vegetable matter (in drier weather conditions). Commonly reported incidents are detailed below.

– Road traffic accidents: these are the most common cause of unnatural mortality in badgers. It is estimated that 20 per cent of Britain’s badger population is killed on the roads every year. Concussions can last for several days and are often seen if the badgers are hit on the head.
– Snares and netting: badgers regularly get caught in snares and will struggle violently to get free, to the point that it is normally not possible to safely release the animal without using an anaesthetic. This is why, on many occasions, badgers are taken to treatment facilities with snares still attached. Due to the high risk of pressure necrosis, these animals should be closely monitored for seven days.

– Fractures: these can sometimes be seen, but especially so when the long leg bones, jaw and skull are involved in the incident.

• Bats

These are the only mammals capable of sustained flight. Bat wings extend to the size of an elongated hand, with a flexible membrane of skin stretched from the body to the tips of the finger and tail.

The first thumb is exposed, with a sharp claw that enables the bat to climb trees, walls and roof linings. Common incidents reported include cat attacks, which are the most common incident affecting bats, since a cat may become a regular stalker of a bat colony (Figure 8), thus causing deaths and injuries on a daily basis.

Summary

Many welfare and legal implications – and zoonotic risks – linked to rehabilitating wildlife casualties are encountered in wildlife hospitals.

A chart showing the percentages of casualties encountered in a wildlife hospital in south Essex, together with a detailed explanation of the welfare, legal implications and zoonotic risks, will be discussed in the second part of this article.

Further reading