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Whatcom Humane Society Wildlife Rehabilitation

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: Wildlife Care Internship

Student Name: Sydney Poulin

Internship Dates: April 6, 2022- June 28, 2022

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STUDENT SIGNATURE 

DATE: 08/01/2022

I. Introduction

In April of 2022, I began my wildlife care internship through the Whatcom Humane Society Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. The WHS Wildlife Center is apart of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association as well as the International Wildlife Rehabilitators Council. Additionally, the wildlife center holds permits under US Fish and Wildlife Services. As a non-profit organization, the wildlife center relies solely on donations from the public to meet the financial stipulations of caring for its patients. The wildlife center receives no government funding. The wildlife center also mainly depends on the public to bring in wildlife that is in need of care. The wildlife center aims to provide all animals in need of rehabilitation with a high standard of care while also maintaining their wild integrity. This means that each patient is given proper treatment that ensures it would not only survive, but thrive upon its release. Using a combination of veterinary skills, natural history, animal anatomy and husbandry, the wildlife center is able to give each patient specialized care that meets the animal's needs.

I chose to pursue the wildlife care internship position because it was an amazing opportunity to work with local wildlife and help those who cannot help themselves. I've always labeled myself as an animal lover. My experience as a wildlife care intern not only allowed me to learn more about wildlife, but also gave me the chance to make a difference in their lives. I was also able to create great

connections to those working in the wildlife rehabilitation industry. The guidance I received from the wildlife technicians was an amazing glimpse into the field and the requirements involved.

II. Internship Responsibilities and Projects

The duration of my internship at the WHS Wildlife Rehabilitation Center was from April 5, 2022 to June 29, 2022. During this time period, I worked 40 hours per week alongside other wildlife care interns and staff members. The period in which I was an intern is known as “baby season” at the wildlife center. During the late spring, the wildlife center sees a large influx of orphaned wild animals in need of care. As a result, the majority of the patients I cared for during my internship were juvenile patients who require specialized care.

II.I. A Day In The Life - Patient Care

My typical eight hour shift would begin at 7:30AM. Upon arrival at the wildlife center each morning, I was rounded by staff members on which patients I would care for in the morning portion of my work day. Though I cared for a vast variety of patients during my internship, I was commonly assigned to care for the baby raccoon patients each morning. Once I had been assigned my patients, I would begin preparing for patient care. To start, I would prepare my patients diet. Using a scale, I would measure out and prepare the appropriate amount of diet for my

patients based on their age and weight. Orphaned baby raccoons also require daily formula tube feeds to replace the nutrients and minerals they would receive from their mother's milk. This also required measuring the required amount of formula based on the patients age and weight. After preparing the diet and syringes of formula, I would head into the raccoon nursery. Though the amount of patients fluctuates, the wildlife center typically cares for ten baby raccoons at a given time. Before performing the formula tube feeds, I would weigh each patient and record their weight in their chart. I also examined each patient for any signs of injury or disease. It was crucial to look for any large weight fluctuations or signs of distemper, an extremely contagious and fatal disease carried by raccoons. After completing weights and examinations, I would then perform a tube feed on each patient. To tube feed a patient, I use a syringe with a long tube attached to deliver formula into the stomach of the raccoon. This requires priming the tube and then maneuvering the tube down the esophagus and into the stomach of the patient. From here, I would begin slowly pushing the formula from the syringe into the tube, where it then enters the stomach. While completing the tube feed, I simultaneously monitored the patient for any signs of aspiration or regurgitation. After I had completed a formula tube feed on each patient, I would completely clean and sanitize the patients enclosure. I also would complete patient charts, making note of the amount of their diet they had consumed overnight and also noting any abnormalities I observed while completing my examinations and feeds.

After I had wrapped up my baby raccoon patient care, I would then provide care to any other patients I had been assigned. After caring for my morning patients, I would then perform a variety of daily chores. These tasks included patient laundry, dishes and basic cleaning and sanitation of the wildlife rehabilitation center.

In between working on chores, I also was responsible for performing patient intakes. During a patient intake, my responsibility was to intake an animal brought to the wildlife center by the public. Intakes involved assisting the public in completing paperwork regarding the animal they'd brought into the center. The intake paperwork provides important information regarding any potential injuries the animal may have and any previous care given by the public. Additionally, patient intakes provided me with a great opportunity to provide public education on the wildlife center's practices. In most cases, the people bringing in wildlife to the rehabilitation center are in a heightened state of emotion due to the condition of the animal they are bringing in. By educating the public, it can provide them with essential knowledge on wildlife while also answering any questions that may be contributing to their stress. As I completed an intake, it was essential that I look for any signs the patient is in need of critical care, such as severe bleeding or trouble breathing. I then bring the patient into the exam room. If the patient isn't in critical condition, it is given time to destress in the exam room before an initial exam is completed.

Following an intake, I was often given the opportunity to assist in intake examinations. These initial examinations were performed by staff members, but I often got to partake in many parts of the exam and learn how to identify common injuries and diseases. During an examination, wildlife technicians observed patients for any physical, neurological and behavioral abnormalities. Throughout the examination, the technicians would inform me on any abnormalities they observed. After an exam, the wildlife technician and I would then discuss a treatment plan for the patient. This rehabilitation plan included necessary medications, enclosure requirements, diet specifications and any quarantine or seclusion periods that may need to occur. To conclude an exam, I would give the patient any necessary sub-queue fluid injections to fight dehydration, as well as begin the patient on any medications.

Along with completing intakes and examinations, I often dedicated multiple hours of my day to working on projects and patient enrichment. The following section goes into specific details of the projects and enrichment activities I was involved in at the wildlife center.

II.II. A Day In the Life- Projects and Patient Enrichment

After caring for my patients, I worked with other interns on a variety of projects. These projects often involved preparing outdoor enclosures for patients that were ready to move into their final stage of the rehabilitation process. At the wildlife center, there are a multitude of enclosures and aviaries to suit the needs of a large

range of species. Since we consistently have animals moving into enclosures then being released, I spent a significant amount of time setting up and disassembling enclosures.

To begin, it was important to make sure the enclosure was covered in windscreen to ensure patients were not exposed to any potentially harsh weather conditions.

After wind screening an enclosure, I would make sure to remove any feces of leftover food from the previous patients who'd inhabited the enclosure. Next, I would rake the enclosure to expose a fresh mulch surface.

Following the general setup and sanitation processes, I would add enrichment based on patient needs to the enclosure. In all outdoor enclosures, I would fill the area with a variety of greenery and branches to mimic the local forest environment. Though this step is crucial, many patients had additional enrichment requirements to ensure success post-release. For instance, species like crows and robins require high-hanging perches that allow them to practice flying and landing. Species such as duck and geese require large pools to swim in to stimulate oil production in their feathers. In other words, each species has different enrichment that will best prepare them for success post-release. Enrichment provides mental and physical stimulation to patients. One particular enrichment project I enjoyed was creating treat puzzles for the raccoon patients at the wildlife center. To do this, I took egg cartons and filled them with raccoon treats, such as peanut butter, hard boiled eggs and fresh fish. From here, I wrapped the egg cartons in duct-tape to create a

physical and mental challenge. Raccoons are quite intelligent and tactile, and this enrichment project allowed them to learn new skills while also providing them with physical stimulation.

The projects at the wildlife center were physically demanding and often repetitive. The common patterns was setting up an enclosure, moving patients into the enclosure, maintaining the enclosure, releasing patients, and then disassembling the enclosure. This project process was repeated dozens upon dozens of times throughout my internship. Projects and enrichment are a crucial aspect of the rehabilitation process, and I feel assured that my contributions made a positive impact on the lives of so many patients. In the next section, I will explain the patient release process.

II.III. A Day In The Life- Release

I was fortunate enough to partake in a few patient releases during my time at the wildlife center. Releases happen after complete rehabilitation has occurred and a final exam has taken place to ensure that a patient is ready for release and has not been habituated during its time at the wildlife center. It is important that wild animals are released with the skills they need to survive and with their wild instincts intact.

At the wildlife center, it is always a goal to release the patient in the location it was found (unless, of course, this location was not suitable for the patient to thrive). To release patients, I would gather them into a kennel that I would then cover with a

sheet. Following this, I would transport the patient to the location of the release in my vehicle. It was important to eliminate any noise that may cause stress to the patient, such as talking or music. At the release site, I would find an area far from the road and residential areas to release the patients. Next, I removed the sheet from the kennel and opened the kennel door. I would then back away and patiently wait for the patients to venture out from the kennel. In some instances, this could take a very long time. It is crucial to allow the patient to take all the time they need to leave the kennel and not add any stress to an already overwhelming situation. After all the patients had left the kennel, I would then immediately leave the release site and return to the wildlife center.

My favorite release I was apart of was a group of eastern grey squirrels. This release was particularly important to me because I had done the intake for the squirrels on one of my first days at the wildlife center. When I completed their intake, the squirrels were babies. Their eyes were not yet open, and they were weak, small and orphaned. I spent weeks providing them with care and watching them grow. Being apart of their release felt incredibly full circle. It was very fulfilling to see the babies I had once hand fed formula to galloping through grass in the wilderness.

Though release is the ultimate goal, it unfortunately is not always the outcome of patients at the wildlife center. In the next section, I will cover the ethic code of the wildlife center, and also discuss the decisions regarding euthanasia

III. Ethics and Euthanasia

The WHS Wildlife Rehabilitation Center follows a strict code of ethics that is established around respecting wildlife in both life and death. On June 13th, 2022, the wildlife center manager Alysha Evans held an ethics workshop for wildlife care interns. From this workshop, I learned how the wildlife center uses its code of ethics in making decisions regarding patient care. One specific code emphasized in the workshop was acknowledging limits. Though unfortunate, those of us working at the wildlife center do not have the ability to rehabilitate all the patients brought to us. It is important to provide the patients we have capacity for with the utmost quality of care, rather than providing an extremely large population of patients with subpar care. Acknowledging limits also goes beyond quantity of patients. We must evaluate our own personal limits as wildlife caregivers to ensure we are meeting an important ethical standard. This means asking ourselves important questions- am I qualified to care for this animal? Do I have the proper supplies to care for this animal? Can I provide what is best for this animal? These questions are just some examples of ways wildlife caregivers must self-evaluate to make sure all patients are being treated with respect to our code of ethics.

In some cases, the most ethical form of care we can give to a patient is euthanasia. As an intern, I was not qualified to perform euthanasia, and was never present during the euthanasia of any patients. However, staff members at the wildlife

center consistently educated myself and the other interns on the importance of euthanasia. Following a patient examination, staff members at the wildlife center must make a decision on whether they believe the animal can be rehabilitated back to a state where it could not only survive, but thrive in the wild. If an animal comes in with injuries or disease that would prevent it from thriving upon release, the ethical choice is to euthanize the patient. It is unethical to release an animal back into the wild with conditions that could cause prolonged suffering. It is more humane to instead offer that animal a peaceful, painless passing while in care. The ability to end suffering and pain is a gift. Decisions regarding euthanasia are never made lightly, but they do occur on a daily basis in the world of wildlife rehabilitation.

IV. Self Reflection

Now that I have completed my internship, I have been able to spend time reflecting on my time spent at the WHS Wildlife Center. When I entered the internship, I knew little about wildlife and the work that goes into rehabilitating different species. I am very grateful to leave the internship feeling well educated in the field of wildlife rehabilitation. I have gained a large understanding on species anatomy and how different injuries prevent survival when left untreated. I learned how to identify disease in species, and as a result I was able to prevent an outbreak of a disease known as distemper at the wildlife center. Likewise, I became comfortable

with handling and caring for all types of wildlife, from small mammals to birds of prey. My experience expanded my knowledge of wildlife care exponentially.

As I reflect on my experience, I feel a strong sense of pride. I dedicated hours upon hours to creatures who are incapable of helping themselves, creatures who are terrified of me, and creatures who cannot express gratitude. Some days, I faced mental and physical exhaustion. Patients I had cared for for weeks would pass away, and it was devastating. I spent long hours in the pouring Washington rain escape-proofing enclosures, and it was grueling. I'd be lying if I said that my wildlife care internship was always easy and perfect. However, I am not lying when I say each day was worth it. The experience I gained at the wildlife center was the most amazing hands-on opportunity I have ever had.

A couple weeks after completing my internship, I received an email from the manager at the wildlife center, Alysha Evans. She had emailed me to inform me that a staff position at the WHS wildlife center was opening up. Not only that, but Alysha also wrote that she thought I would be an excellent fit for the position. I was beyond thrilled. After working alongside a multitude of interns, I was honored that I had stood out to my manager and that she had extended this offer to me. Unfortunately, I was unable to accept the position as for it conflicted with my schedule as I work toward my undergraduate degree. However, the job offer was an implication that my hard work had paid off and not gone unnoticed. It was confirmation that the staff at the wildlife center thought I had the ability to become

a wildlife rehabilitator. As someone who has a tendency to focus on their weaknesses, it was fulfilling to finally give some well-deserved recognition to my strengths.

My internship at the WHS Wildlife Center increased my passion for working with animals. After learning the basics of wildlife rehabilitation through this internship, I am hoping to take more steps in the direction of working with animals. Though I completed this internship early in my undergraduate career, I believe it was the right choice. It has given me a good idea of the classes that will set me up for a fulfilling career as I continue forward in my education.

The main fear I have of entering the field of wildlife rehabilitation is financial instability. Since wildlife rehabilitation does not receive government funding, rehabilitators are not paid a wage other STEM related careers may offer. Despite this, my internship at the WHS Wildlife Center gave me crucial tools to succeed in my future career. I am thankful for the knowledge I brought into the internship from my previously taken courses at Western Washington University. In the same way, I am thankful that I leapt at each opportunity to grow my understanding. I constantly requested to observe examinations and to work with patients during my time at the wildlife center. Most importantly, I always made sure to ask questions. I strongly believe my previous knowledge, accompanied by my strong desire to learn, led to my success as a wildlife care intern. I am excited

to see what opportunities the future holds, and to continue to learn more as I move forward in my undergraduate career.