What to do if you find a wild animal

by Anne Muraski

As a general rule, if you find any wild animal in distress, do not move or disturb it. Call SPCA Wildlife Rescue immediately at 373-2631 or 422-4721, ext. 0. The operator will either connect you with the Wildlife Center for advice, or dispatch a State Humane Officer.

In Monterey County, The SPCA is the agency assigned to rescue and rehabilitate wildlife; they possess the necessary permits from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, and National Marine Fisheries. Never attempt to treat or keep a wild animal yourself—it is illegal, and injured and orphaned animals have specialized needs that only trained and experienced technicians can provide in an equipped clinic. Even a day or two of the wrong diet can permanently injure or kill an animal.

Here are some guidelines for specific animals and situations.

Baby birds

If you find a baby bird that can’t fly yet, you should put the fledgling in a safe place and try to find the nest from which it fell. The bird has the best chance of survival if it is returned to the nest. It is a myth that birds will reject their young if handled by humans. If the bird is old enough to run away, you may throw a pillow case or light towel over it to aid in capture.

If you can’t find or reach the nest, you can fashion a temporary one with a very small box or a cut down milk carton. Fill it with soft bedding material and fasten it to the tree or another high place safe from predators. Many times the parents will continue to feed the baby from the makeshift nest.

Baby birds need constant feeding, so if the parent doesn’t return within two hours, bring the bird to the Wildlife Center. If the bird was caught by a cat or seems sick or injured, it should always be brought to the Center for treatment. Place the bird in a covered cardboard box lined with a soft cloth. A cage is not a good choice because it allows the bird to see out. Reduce all stimuli by keeping the box in a safe, warm, dark, quiet place. Do not disturb the bird by checking on it. Minimum contact reduces stress and increases any animal’s chances of survival. Bring the bird to The SPCA shelter across from Laguna Seca on Highway 68, or call them if you can’t transport or capture it yourself.

As a preventative measure, avoid tree trimming during the April-September baby bird season unless you are absolutely sure there are no nests present. All native bird species in Monterey County are protected by federal law, and that includes any nests containing eggs or babies.

If swallows are just starting to build their mud nests in an area you find undesirable, you may hose the nests down and put up temporary deterrents such as balloons, streamers or tin cans. Never disturb occupied nests—wait until the young are fledged. Many people provide an alternative nesting site made of a simple piece of plywood with an overhanging eave. Position it in a high place away from cats, and enjoy the company of these beneficial, insect-eating birds.

Marine mammal

The Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibits touching, disturbing or harassing marine mammals in any way. If you are worried about one, call The SPCA, which National Marine Fisheries has designated as the Stranding Coordinator for Monterey County. SPCA Humane Officers will evaluate the animal’s condition, rescue it if necessary, or activate “Beachwatch,” a local volunteer group from the Monterey Bay Chapter of the American Cetacean Society. Beachwatch volunteers can monitor the marine mammal until it can be rescued or returns to the sea on its own.

The harbor seal pupping season runs from late March through mid-May. Like many wild
animals, harbor seals must leave their offspring to for- age for food. Sometimes the mother returns to find her pup missing because a well-meaning person has “rescued” it. (This also happens to deer, which return from browsing to find that the fawn they hid earlier is gone.) Seal pups have died or suffered permanent brain damage from hyperthermia when their “rescuer” decided they needed to be “warmed up.”

Harbor seals return annually to shared pupping beaches to birth and raise their young. Since loud noises or quick movements can cause mother seals to stampede and trample pups, these areas are off-limits when pups are present.

One place you can safely observe mothers and pups is at the Cypress Point turnout on 17 Mile Drive in Pebble Beach. The Pebble Beach Company protects harbor seals during pupping season by erecting blinds each year so we can all enjoy the animals without harming them.

Unlike harbor seals, otters do not haul out on beaches with their pups, but will leave them on the water surface while diving for food. If you find a beached otter pup or a harbor seal pup that is alone, call The SPCA immediately.

Unwanted houseguests

Opossums, raccoons, and other animals often find that attics, foundations, garages and crawl spaces make ideal homes and nurseries, especially during the spring birthing season. While some homeowners don’t mind cohabitating, others may find it a nuisance. If you discover a wild family, you should allow them 6-8 weeks to raise their young before taking action. If you seal the entranceway before then, you will trap the babies inside to starve.

When the brood is old enough, they accompany their mother during her night time foraging. One way to help insure the nest is empty before sealing is to sprinkle a dusting of flour near the entrance during the day when you know they’re inside. When you see the footprints leading out you’ll know they’ve probably gone, but a visual inspection is always best in case one is left behind.

What you can do: Humane and environmentally safe deterrents can temporarily repel animals and give you a chance to remedy whatever is attracting them. Most animals look for dark, warm, quiet places with available food and water, so any way you can change this environment will deter them. Try placing a loud radio, tin cans or another noise source near the trouble spot. Light the area or hose it down to make it uncomfortable. Some species, like raccoons, foxes and opossums, are sensitive to smells, so pepper or ammonia soaked rags spread in an enclosed space while the animal is gone should keep it from returning. Keep in mind that even these deterrents should not be used when offspring are present.

What not to do: Trapping and relocating are illegal without a permit, and will not solve the problem—there’s always another animal waiting to move in. And if you trap a lactating mother, you may cause her offspring to slowly starve. Most often people ending up trapping the neighbor’s cat, a skunk—just about anything accept the target animal. Also, relocating an animal to unfamiliar and inadequate habitat will often lead to its death. Any given habitat can only sustain a limited number of animals before becoming depleted. In most situations, an animal has the best chance of survival staying where it is. Never use poisons. They are inhumane and can result in the secondary poisoning of raptors, other wild scavengers and pets.

No “quick fix” will take care of the source of the problem, which usually lies with the human’s behavior, not the animal’s. Often people unknowingly provide a food and water source by leaving pet bowls outside or not securing garbage. Failing to perform routine home maintenance is another common reason for wildlife invasion. Unsealed foundations, missing vents and attic openings are irresistible to wildlife. If trees provide access to the roof, you can trim branches or affix 3-foot-wide aluminum flashing around the trunk about 4 feet off the ground. Focus on eliminating the attraction—not the animal.

Living with other species

As our lifestyles separate us further and further from the natural world, we tend to view wild animals as intruders instead of vital contributors to our ecosystem. Too often, people are quick to eradicate wildlife which is doing no harm because it’s on “their property.” Yet the Monterey County that serves as human “habitat” is also home for a wide diversity of wildlife that was here first.

Sadly, development and other human activities have made Monterey County a dangerous place for wildlife. Before you take any action against an animal, take a moment to weigh the inconvenience. If a raccoon is tearing up your shingles you need to block their access to the roof immediately, but a mother with young under your porch will be gone in a couple of months. Practicing tolerance of wildlife is one way of compensating for the enormous toll our human activities have taken. Keep in mind that it is we who are living in the middle of their habitat, and most often there is nowhere else to go.

All wild animals are important in the ecological balance, and many are beneficial to humans by helping to control rodents and insects. If a wild animal is causing damage, it may take some persistence to deal humanely with the unwanted guest. For more helpful solutions, please feel free to call the Wildlife Center and leave a detailed message at 373-2631, or 422-4721, ext. 227. The limited staff returns all calls at intervals throughout the day. Our hope is that everyone will strive to live in harmony with the few species of wildlife that have adapted to our vast areas of development.