

the myth of humane relocation



Photo by S. Sunny

by Kelle Kacmarcik, Director of Wildlife Solutions and Advocacy

Every day WildCare's Hotline receives calls from people looking for humane and do-it-yourself ways to resolve conflicts with wildlife. Callers frequently ask about live trapping and relocating the animal to open space or another non-residential area, thinking that is a humane solution. Most people don't want the animal(s) to die or be killed, and their intent is almost always good, but what they don't realize is that relocation often has deadly consequences.

territory and resources

Trapping and relocating "nuisance" wildlife is an outdated conflict management technique; it is not humane, is illegal in California (and many other states), and is ineffective. When an animal is removed from his home territory by trapping or killing, an opening is created, and another animal will soon fill that void. Wild animals choose territories based on the availability of resources. As long as the attractant remains (food, shelter and water), other animals will show up. Removing the attractant is the effective and permanent solution.

Animals who are relocated have no idea where to find food and water sources, safe places to hide or shelter. These animals get dumped in the home range of other animals, leading to territory disputes, severe and even fatal injuries, starvation and dehydration.



Carcass of dead opossum Most relocated wildlife dies within the first 3 months.
Photo by brm1949 - Adobe Stock

high mortality

Research conducted in Toronto on live-trapped, radio-collared raccoons who were relocated was published in a paper titled "Relocation of City Raccoons"

by Rosatte and MacInnes in 1989. This research concluded, "Mortality within the first three months of release was at least 50% and may have been as high as 75%," and 50% of the surviving raccoons who were recaptured several weeks later were found to be in very poor body condition or underweight. Annual mortality of resident raccoons in the same sample area was less than 20%.

Another paper, "Movement and Mortality of Translocated Urban-Suburban Grey Squirrels," published in 2004 by Adams, Hadidian and Flyger, focused on live-trapped, radio-collared squirrels who were relocated from a suburb of Washington, D.C. to a large wooded area. This study documented that 97% of the relocated squirrels died and disappeared from the release area within three months.

Death by relocation isn't limited to raccoons and squirrels. In 2000, a paper by Fischer and Lindenmayer titled "An Assessment of the Published Results of Animal Relocations," reviewed 180 case studies on relocated animals and determined, "Translocations that aimed to solve human-animal conflicts generally failed."

orphans

Whether it's a bird nest on your front porch, a hole and den dug by a skunk under your shed, a gap a squirrel chewed in your roof, or a vent cover a raccoon pulled back to get under your house, vulnerabilities in homes and other structures open up opportunities for wildlife to get inside.



Fox kits in trap Babies orphaned due to illegal relocation of mothers are common at WildCare during baby season. Photo by Kelle Kacmarcik

In our experience, wild animals almost always do this to create a nest and raise their family, and one of the saddest components of relocation has to be the orphans that are too often left behind to die of starvation in the walls, crawl spaces or attics.

Rotting carcasses in a confined or inaccessible area create a much bigger problem. Trapping and relocating the mom along with her babies is not effective either, and is not humane. A void has still opened up, and the stress of being trapped and moved to unfamiliar territory without knowing where to find food, water and shelter can cause a mother to kill her young.



Young mother raccoon caught in a trap with her three-week-old babies Photo WildCare archives



Fox Squirrel with mange Spreading disease is a major concern related to illegal relocation that can devastate local wildlife populations. Photo by Melanie Piazza

disease & human safety

The spread of infectious disease and potentially human safety, is one of the primary concerns in the relocation of wildlife. Even in a relatively small area like the Bay Area, diseases can vary from region to region. Diseases and illnesses introduced to a new area by translocations of wildlife include: tuberculosis, rabies, parvoviral enteritis, viral pneumonia and brucellosis.

In the 1970s and then again in the 80s, there were outbreaks of raccoon and skunk rabies in Ontario, Canada and in the southeastern U.S., respectively. The spread of this deadly disease was attributed to the relocation of wildlife, and to this day, it is still a huge concern in both regions.

the legalities

Whether you hire a licensed trapper to trap and kill an animal (*see alternatives right*) who has become a nuisance to you, or if you take matters into your own hands, California law (along with many other states) strictly prohibits the relocation of wildlife by anyone, including licensed trappers. State law specifies that trapped nuisance wildlife, such as raccoons and skunks, must be released on site or killed following American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Guidelines. Anyone trapping nuisance wildlife, licensed or not, must obtain written consent from all neighbors within 150 yards “of any structure used as a permanent or temporary residence” from the location where the trap will be set, and all traps must bear a number issued by and registered with the California

Department of Fish & Wildlife.

California Department of Fish & Wildlife Title 14 CCR Sect. 465.5 covers trapping of nuisance wildlife. Migratory birds (almost all birds in Northern California) also benefit from federal protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Federal regulation prohibits the removal, relocation or tampering with migratory birds, their eggs and/or active nests; Title 50, Code of Federal Regulations, 21.27.



Even non-body gripping traps can cause serious injuries. This raccoon came to WildCare after being left all day in the blazing sun, on a roof, in a cage trap. Photo by Kelle Kacmarcik

when relocation is allowed

In extreme circumstances, permits to relocate wildlife (both individual animals and populations) are sometimes granted by and/or carried out by the state or federal government. Sometimes permits are required from both agencies, depending on the species and the situation. For example, relocations and translocations of threatened and endangered species have been carried out by federal and state wildlife agencies for conservation purposes, and to reintroduce them into part of their historical range. These actions are taken very seriously, and require expertise in determining the potential impact on the environment and habitat, on the species as a whole, and on the individual animals themselves.



Young Tule Elk being reintroduced to an area where they once thrived Photo courtesy of CDFW



Skunks cannot climb well but raccoons can easily push down large objects such as unsecured trash cans and share the feast with other wild animals. Photo by Geoff Kuchera

alternative solutions

Studies on the subject show that the most effective and long-term solutions to resolving conflicts with wildlife are to remove attractants and to prevent and exclude animals from accessing a structure. WildCare encourages taking a look at the bigger picture, at what is happening on the property to explain the presence of unwanted animals; they live within close proximity to us because, whether intentionally or not, we provide them with the things they need to survive. Birdfeeders, pet food left outside, fruit trees, wood and brush piles, as well as open compost piles will draw wildlife in and serve as an open invitation to spend more time in your yard and neighborhood.



Food for one species is food for another. Wildlife like this Eastern Gray Squirrel also thrive on seeds, and will take advantage of easy access food such as bird feeders. Photo by Shaun Wilkinson

Springtime is baby season for wildlife, and this is the time of year when conflicts with animals increase dramatically. Trapping and relocating wildlife is never the solution when dealing with “nuisance” wildlife. If you experience a problematic situation with a wild animal, please call us or take a look at our website for advice. We are here seven days a week from 9am to 5pm at 415-453-1000 x23, and look forward to helping you find humane and effective solutions to live well with your local wildlife.