

LOVING WILDLIFE TO DEATH

By Kathryn Keen



Have you ever heard of the term "loving an animal to death"? In terms of wildlife care, this is a very real problem, and wildlife carers need to be careful to avoid this happening. "Loving Wildlife To Death" occurs when hand-raised wild animals are loved, nurtured and babied by well-meaning wildlife carers to such an extent that the animal is imprinted on humans, and does not develop the skills needed to survive in the wild. Animals that are not allowed to progress through their normal stages of development at the correct time can remain completely dependant upon humans and will be unable to manage on their own.

Animals that are kept from their own species and raised alone are far more likely to imprint on humans. An imprinted animal thinks it is a human, and as an adult, may direct it's mating behaviour towards humans. Not only can this cause problems for people, but it is a recipe for disaster for the animal itself. Imprinted animals have lost all their natural caution or fear of humans and human environments, and usually end up being killed by nearby cats, dogs, or even people. Imprinted animals can often be ostracised or even attacked by their own species, and they may not be able to find their own food or shelter.



Animals that are released without having been allowed the right time to exercise in suitable facilities, as well as to be able to become used to different weather conditions, will simply suffer, and many soon die. It is often a long cruel death, and is a very sad end for a little animal that was probably much loved and cared about.



Life is very hard for wildlife at the best of times, and any animal being returned to the wild must be extremely fit and healthy, in order to survive. A hand-raised native animal that has never been given access to a suitable large enclosure or aviary, will have weak muscles, and birds would also most likely have damaged feathers. They will not have been able to develop normal behaviour, and if these animals were to be released straight from a small enclosure, their chances of survival are not good at all. If not raised with others of their own kind, their chances of surviving and thriving once freed, become even less.

Any hand-raised wildlife - and also adult wildlife recovering from injuries - needs to be housed in proper facilities at the right stage of development or rehabilitation, in order for the animal to become strong and able to manage when released. They must have been given the opportunity to be able to recognise, seek out and find their natural foods, shelter and habitat, through the provision of correct rearing methods, and suitable facilities, during their time in care. If an imprinted hand-raised released animal that has been hanging around for a while, suddenly disappears; the chances are that it has been killed. This is not a successful rearing, rehabilitation or release, but is merely abandonment.



STEPS TO AVOID LOVING WILDLIFE TO DEATH

- Learn about the animals you are hand-raising and about the approximate timing and stages of development. Encourage hand-raised animals to self-feed and to become independent at the appropriate time. Don't "baby" juvenile animals once they are starting to mature. Never hold back a wild animal's natural development.
- Provide suitable facilities for animals in care, at the right stage of their development or rehabilitation. If you are unable to provide the right facilities, arrange to move the animal to a carer who can, as soon as possible.
- With appropriate species, wherever possible, hand-raised wildlife should be placed with others of their own species, at a similar stage of development. Whilst some carers may want to hang on to the baby animal they have rescued, it is important to consider this animal's welfare first and foremost.
- Never release a hand-raised animal without first ensuring that it is strong, fit, healthy and agile. It must be able to recognise, and capture, or obtain its natural foods, and be of the right age and stage of development to be able to not only survive, but to thrive where it is released.
- Remember that the native animals we rear and release are not pets. Treating them as pets, and not allowing them to grow into normal healthy adults of their species, will ultimately cost them their lives. In any considerations, always put the animal's welfare and ultimate survival first.