

## Euthanasia Policy

One of the biggest problems wildlife rescues face is balancing the welfare and suffering of wildlife casualties when in a condition which would mean they can't be returned to the wild. Our wildlife do not have owners who can pick up on a problem early and seek veterinary help. Often casualties are in a very poor condition by the time they are noticed and a rescue called, mean treatment is much harder and less successful than domestic pets.

### **Who is responsible for deciding when to euthanise a casualty?**

At East Sussex WRAS, the welfare of animals is our top priority. The decision to euthanize a casualty is made with great care, and it is our policy that this responsibility should never fall on a single individual. Animals will instinctively fight to survive, which is why we are committed to providing each casualty with personalized care and attention. If there is any uncertainty about a casualty's chance of survival, we ensure they receive support for at least 24 to 48 hours before reassessment, involving our Veterinary Surgeon and Care Team.

Euthanasia is never performed out on-site without prior veterinary assessment. The only exception is for deer; if they are untreatable, a qualified firearms expert is called to administer euthanasia.

What are the key reasons casualties have to be euthanised?

Our goal at WRAS is to rehabilitate as many casualties as possible and return them to their natural habitat. However, there are times when euthanasia is the most humane option, such as for a road casualty fox with irreversible paralysis or a cat attacked bird with severe injuries.

WRAS identifies the following clear-cut cases for euthanasia, based on procedures from St Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital:

- A severed and displaced vertebral column.
- The loss of two or more limbs.
- A bird that is completely blind.
- A swan, goose, or duck that has lost a leg (after consultation with the Swan Sanctuary Veterinary Team).
- Most adult male deer that cannot be released.
- Disabled wood pigeons, as they do not thrive in captivity.
- Birds of prey and Corvids with only one leg.

We also consider the following less clear-cut cases for euthanasia, again following St Tiggywinkles Wildlife Hospital guidelines:

- Any casualty facing unacceptable pain, even with treatments.

## Euthanasia Policy

- Any casualty that would have no quality of life, even if it recovers and is kept in captivity.
- Any casualty that cannot benefit from veterinary techniques evolved for domestic animals but which are not suitable for wildlife.
- Any casualty requiring prolonged confinement without appropriate facilities available.

### **Do you put to sleep casualties just because they have broken wings and legs?**

No. Each fracture is different, some can be repaired and others due to the age of the injury, the location of the fracture, infection level, tissue damage, additional injuries, and even whether the bird is healthy enough to survive an anaesthetic are all contributing factors. Its not as black and white as people think.

### **Why is wildlife treated differently to domestic pets?**

It is important to remember that wild animals and birds are wild - they are not the same as domestic or agricultural animals. They react completely differently and do not show fear in the same way as pets or humans. They also do not rationalise situations or understands circumstances with the same logic as we humans.

It is the natural instinct of wildlife to avoid showing distress as they are likely to be targeted by either predators or others of their own species. They know that if they cry out or make a noise this may attract predators. They will do everything they can to hide their pain and distress to the point that many people often mistake wildlife for being calm and happy when they are actually badly injured and suffering.

We must remember that these creatures fear humans. They also have to deal with capture myopathy which is a chemical change which occurs internally which causes permanent damage and once enough damage is caused the animal will have a heart attack and die. Species like deer, wood pigeon and pheasants suffer greatly from this and have been known to die during rescue. Other species suffer the same but over long periods of time.

It is crucial not to project our emotions and feelings onto wild animals. Misinterpreting a casualty's condition can lead to unnecessary suffering. Each species reacts differently and has unique stress factors that affect their ability to be treated and returned to the wild.

### **If cost an issue?**

While WRAS is fortunate to have superior facilities compared to many small wildlife rescue organizations, our funds are not unlimited. WRAS has the facilities to go beyond the level of treatment and care which can be provided by most organisations. WRAS frequently takes on casualties from smaller organisations to help cover these costs.

## Euthanasia Policy

WRAS will also pass over casualties to other more specialist organisations where necessary too.

We have been asked, or expected at times, to send casualties to top veterinary surgeons for complex surgery or for reconstruction of damaged legs or prosthetic limbs and even wheels. These procedures are extremely expensive running into the tens or thousands of pounds and are just not practical for charities of our size to fund especially for the volume of casualties which would need these procedures. They would also be considered cruel and potentially illegal due to the time in which these casualties which need intense care in captivity and then likely not be releasable.

### **Could casualties which can't be returned to the wild be kept in captivity or as pets?**

WRAS does not oppose keeping disabled wildlife in captivity, but there are very few facilities available. Most, we believe, are inappropriate, too small, lack suitable environmental enrichment or are overcrowded, leading to distress and suffering.

WRAS is not a sanctuary and do not have the means to keep disabled or non-releasable casualties. Do you keep lots of wildlife in captivity and cover the costs of food/cleaning/bedding/veterinary care for years to come and then not have space or funding to take in any which can be rehabilitated and returned to the wild? There aren't enough facilities in the UK to deal with all the wildlife which can be returned to the wild let alone those that can't and the space also doesn't exist to set up big enough and well enough enriched facilities either.

As a general rule most casualties which cannot be returned to the wild are not suitable for sanctuaries as they would not cope well enough or would suffer significant mental trauma and be cruel, in the same way that taking animals from the wild for zoos and entertainment is considered cruel.

WRAS strongly advocates that any disabled wildlife must experience the five freedoms:

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst: ensuring access to fresh water and a suitable diet for health.
2. Freedom from Discomfort: providing an appropriate environment with ground cover, shelter, and comfortable resting areas.
3. Freedom from Pain, Injury, or Disease: ensuring rapid diagnosis and treatment in hygienic conditions.
4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour: allowing sufficient space, proper facilities, and social interactions.
5. Freedom from Fear and Distress: ensuring conditions and treatments that prevent mental suffering.

## Euthanasia Policy

This is rarely available and not possible for people to achieve at home. Wild animals generally do not make good pets. Wild animals are used to roaming miles so once kept confined they become stressed and suffer mentally.

As mentioned above, wildlife hide their distress well, so taking a wild animal from its natural environment and keeping it in captivity in a pen for the rest of its life would be considered cruel. These creatures are wild, we must respect them for being wild and not let our emotions cause cruelty and distress to them.

It is a regrettable reality that wildlife rescue organizations across the country must euthanize casualties, as many trauma cases are too severe to recover from. The primary responsibility of any rescue organization is to ensure that casualties do not suffer. Unfortunately, some casualties must be euthanized for medical reasons.

### **The casualty which was euthanised didn't show any signs of injury?**

Often critical injuries are internal and invisible. On the surface casualties can look fit and well, but as mentioned before they hide their suffering well. Often internal injuries are invisible with no outward signs. Often only detected once an x-ray or blood tests are taken.

### **I feel guilty for seeking help. Should I have just left alone or let nature take its own course?**

You should not feel guilty although this is a natural response. Leaving these casualties to slowly die or struggle is cruel. We have to put our own feelings and emotions aside and think of what is best for the welfare of the casualty all the time. The key reason organisations like WRAS exist is because the majority of casualties are as a result of human activity. It is important we prevent their suffering and return them to the wild where possible.

### **WRAS is dedicated to improving the chances of our wildlife.**

Over the past three decades, WRAS has made significant advancements. Where we once could not house and treat certain casualties, we now provide larger and better facilities.

WRAS is dedicated to enhancing its facilities and continually improving its ability to care for wildlife. We learn from other established rescue centres and experts within the industry to adopt new techniques for treatment and care, expand our facilities to accommodate more casualties, and invest in new equipment to enhance the quality of care we provide.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to us.