



National
WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS
Association

Position Statement

Proposed by the NWRA Veterinary Committee: 25 May 2020

Approved by the NWRA Board of Directors: 02 June 2020

The Use of Surrogate Wild Animals

Surrogates¹ are adult animals housed with orphan young, usually of the same species. In some cases the surrogates assume full parenting responsibilities, and in other cases they are simply a social conspecific from whom the young can learn species-normal behaviors, or at a minimum, imprint upon a conspecific adult. In most cases, a non-releasable animal is kept in captivity for the rest of its life and may serve a parenting role repeatedly. In rare instances, the surrogate could be a wild patient, with or without its own young, to whom orphaned young are introduced where all may be released together.

The use of surrogate parent wild animals in wildlife rehabilitation centers has been allowed for multiple species, especially those in which human imprinting and/or habituation is common (e.g., raptors and bears), or when some behaviors are difficult to acquire in captivity (e.g., osprey eating fish). Numerous surrogate programs in captive facilities (zoos, rehabilitation centers, breeding facilities, etc.) have shown success² in the release and reintroduction of species to the wild.

The NWRA Veterinary Committee supports the use of permanent, captive wild animals as surrogate parents in wildlife rehabilitation centers if and only if the animal is deemed non-releasable and is an appropriate candidate for captive placement. The surrogate's welfare is always considered as the top priority. These animals can be used to raise orphans if the welfare of the surrogate, their own offspring (if applicable), and the introduced orphan(s) is not jeopardized by the relationship or circumstances.

Like any other non-releasable animal (education or display), the animal's welfare is paramount. The animal needs to be healthy, must tolerate or become habituated to captivity and handling, must have access to veterinary care, must have a preventive medicine program implemented (e.g., annual or semi-annual health assessments conducted by a veterinarian), and must have a documented nutritional and enrichment program implemented.

Permanent captives that are imprinted on humans or have other abnormal behaviors are not appropriate surrogate parents because their behavior is not wild-normal; these animals are not appropriate behavioral models for growing young and should not be used as surrogates.

¹ Surrogate and foster parent are interchangeable terms in this context

² Please see Further Reading as an Appendix to this document. The reader is also directed to the current edition of Standards, National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (forthcoming, 2020).

Allowing a surrogate to enter into a rehabilitation facility for the purpose of raising young should be done on a case-by-case basis. Not all non-releasable wild animals are appropriate surrogate parents, and not all facilities are set up to correctly house surrogates. An assessment of the animal's stress levels and behavior in captivity, health status, behavior toward young of the same species, and overall suitability as a surrogate candidate must be considered. The surrogate's health and suitability for such a program should be reassessed annually to ensure its welfare remains a top priority.

In terms of wild animal patients currently undergoing rehabilitation with a path to release, the NWRA Veterinary Committee also supports their use as surrogate parents, provided it is on an exception basis and is not the norm. An assessment of the animal's stress levels and behavior in captivity, health status, behavior toward young of the same species, and overall suitability as a surrogate candidate must be carefully considered. Proper facilities for the surrogate and the young must also be in place. Wild adult animal patients being evaluated as surrogates must have their own medical and rehabilitative needs kept as the top priority, with close monitoring of any surrogating relationships so that neither the adult's nor the young's progress through rehabilitation is jeopardized, and no animal's return to the wild is delayed.

Further Reading

1. Buhl, G. 2018. Animal Selection. Pp. 36–38 in *Wildlife in Education: A Guide for the Care and Use of Program Animals*, 2nd edition (G. Buhl, J. Schlieps, and L. Smith editors). National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association: St. Cloud, MN.
2. Gage, L.J., Duerr, R.S. (2020). Hand-rearing birds, 2nd Ed. Wiley-Blackwell, Ames, IA. Pp. 816
3. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/25/21152576/cheetah-cub-in-vitro-fertilization-first-birth-surrogate-video-columbus-zoo>
4. Johnson, A., Mayer, K. (2005). The value of rescuing, treating, and releasing live-stranded sea otters. *Sea Otter Conservation*. Pp. 235-255.
5. Lacy, Kit. (2020, in press). Selection Process for Non-Releasable Birds: The First Step in Bird Welfare. *Wildlife Rehabilitation Bulletin*, Vol. 36, No. 1.
6. Miller, E. A. 2012. Final Disposition. Pp. 74–75 in *Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation*, 4th edition. National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association: St Cloud, MN.
7. Thompson, T.R., Apa, A.D., Reese, K.P., Tadvick, K.M. (2015). Captive rearing sage-grouse for augmentation of surrogate wild brooding: Evidence for success. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 79(5):998-1013.