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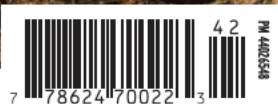
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NEWS

## SAVING CANADA'S WILDLIFE

*The National Wildlife Centre's Veterinary Training Program is helping train veterinarians as wildlife experts*

BY SYLVIA DEKKER

**W**hat would you do if you found an injured eagle on the trail? It's likely your pet's veterinarian can't and won't accept the patient. "Nor should they," says Dr. Sherri Cox, cofounder and medical director at the National Wildlife Centre (NWC).

"Vets don't get enough training in wildlife medicine and surgery. Nor do they have experience to work with wildlife,"

Dr. Cox says.

The NWC, a medical and rehab organization, aims to change that with their innovative Wildlife Veterinary Training Program.

"We're seeing more human-wildlife interactions than ever before," says Dr. Cox.

This is due to habitat fragmentation, urban sprawl, impacts of climate change and increasing societal interest in wildlife. Even if it's unintentional, our impact is often harmful, creating a growing need for more vets with knowledge and experience in the intricacies of these wild species.

Based in Ontario, the NWC works at the national level, providing medical oversight with partner wildlife rehabilitator organizations across the country. Through the training program, interns—vets with at least one year of practical experience—are placed at these organizations. Dr. Cox provides training, overseeing the cases they treat.

The benefits are twofold: more vets are trained to become wildlife vets so they can

go back to their practices and help more animals, plus partner organizations have a vet on staff which they may not have had before. While being trained, the interns ensure the health both of animals already in the rehab centre's care and the constant stream of incoming patients. Partner organization Hope for Wildlife in Nova Scotia, for example, can see 7,000 wild animals per year.



Ultimately, the program "elevates the level of medical and surgical care that we can provide to animals across Canada," says Dr. Cox.

Increasing numbers of wild patients is not the only gap the program bridges. Wildlife medicine is far from simple, with each species presenting unique anatomy, metabolism and physiology. "The eyeball of a bird is very different than the eyeball of a mammal, the beaver is different than a racoon is different than a squirrel," Dr. Cox says.

Wildlife vets need to "know all the intricacies of the medications. A particular drug we can give to kestrel is very different than a red-tailed hawk, even though both are birds of prey."

Wildlife vets also must know how to handle the feral animals, plus their natural history. "You can't amputate the front leg of a fox like you can a dog for example: wild animals must be perfect to go back into the wild," says Dr. Cox.

The program's only weakness is "we are a volunteer organization and rely on public donations to support [it]." Plus, "wild patients don't have owners: there is no

one to pay the bills. We are always looking for sponsors: if we had more financial resources, we could take on more vets to train."

More wildlife vets equals more success stories like those the NWC can already tell: a young bear went into orthopaedic surgery with two broken legs

after being hit by a car and was released in perfect shape later the same year. A female turtle with a broken shell healed after being rescued. "Every turtle species in Ontario is a species at risk, and some can take 20 years to reach sexual maturity. Every time we help a turtle, we're helping the population."

By turning vets into wildlife vets, Dr. Cox believes "we are going to save more wildlife and save more species at risk."

And even if the interns return to companion animal practice after leaving the program, they will at least be able and willing to accept and triage the injured eagle you found on the trail.

[nationalwildlifecentre.ca](http://nationalwildlifecentre.ca) x