



# British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council

## Truly Wild on Screen: A Code of Conduct for Production Companies and Wildlife Rehabilitators Handling or filming Rescued Wildlife

### **Introduction**

Wild animals captivate the curiosity and fascination of people in the UK, often drawing significant media interest with conservation news or research findings about various species. However, this interest can lead to disappointment when TV production teams discover that responsible wildlife rehabilitation organisations, including the BWRC, do not supply animals for studio or location appearances. This Code of Conduct outlines the serious welfare concerns associated with using wildlife in studio settings. It aims to benefit both TV production teams and wildlife rehabilitators by ensuring the full impact of participation is considered, avoiding unnecessary stress and suffering for the animals whilst also ensuring the wildlife rehabilitation sector is fairly portrayed

### **Behaviour and welfare**

Wild animals brought into captivity for rehabilitation experience significant stress. Stress can lead to physiological and behavioural changes such as elevated glucocorticoid levels, weight loss, and a compromised immune system (1). The conditions of confinement and exposure to humans can result in chronic stress, which may have long-term or permanent impacts on their health and well-being(2). This Code of Conduct aims to highlight these serious welfare concerns and ensure that the full impact of participation in media activities is considered, avoiding unnecessary stress and suffering for the animals in rehabilitation.

### **Circadian rhythms and public misconceptions**

Many wild animals, such as hedgehogs and bats, are nocturnal, meaning they are active during the night. Observing these animals during daylight hours often indicates distress. Depicting nocturnal animals as active during the day without proper context can mislead the public and increase stress for the animals. While producers might find it more convenient to film these animals during the day, the welfare of the animals must take precedence. Such misrepresentation can have serious negative impacts on both the animals' welfare and conservation efforts, as it can distort public understanding and education. Disrupting the natural behaviours of nocturnal animals can lead to increased stress and reduced survival rates. According to Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, animals must be allowed to exhibit normal behavioural patterns. This Code of Conduct emphasises the importance of prioritising the welfare of nocturnal animals, ensuring their natural behaviours are respected and avoiding unnecessary stress and suffering.

## **Handling and hibernation**

Many species in the UK, including hedgehogs, bats, and dormice, undergo hibernation during the winter months. Handling should be limited to recognised research programs or essential care to minimise stress and potential harm. Unnecessary handling, especially on television, can encourage viewers to handle these animals themselves or attempt to keep them as pets, which can be detrimental to their welfare and undermine conservation efforts.

Hedgehogs, for example, typically hibernate during the colder months, making it nearly impossible to film them in the wild during winter without causing distress. Similarly, bats and dormice also enter hibernation during this period, and disturbing them can lead to significant stress and depletion of their energy reserves, which are critical for their survival through the winter.

It is crucial to respect the natural hibernation cycles of these species. Disrupting their hibernation can have severe consequences, including increased mortality rates. Therefore, this Code of Conduct emphasises the importance of minimising disturbance to hibernating animals and prioritising their welfare by avoiding unnecessary handling and ensuring their natural behaviours are not disrupted.

## **Alternative options**

There are several solutions to create entertaining and informative television content without disturbing wildlife in rehabilitation. Wildlife rescue centres may have archived footage from CCTV or other sources showing animals behaving naturally, which can be used for broadcast purposes. These centres often permit onsite filming, provided that disturbance is minimised.

Additionally, responsible wildlife rehabilitators and organisations can be recommended for safe filming of captive wildlife in rehabilitation. Many wildlife rescue centres also have networks of volunteers who frequently observe wildlife in its natural environment and can provide compelling human stories to accompany wildlife segments.

## **Filming in wildlife rehabilitation centres**

All filming activities taking place in wildlife rehabilitation centres should be undertaken with the welfare of wildlife casualties as the primary focus. Animals should not be handled for filming purposes, and appropriate PPE should be worn at all times. Disturbance should be kept to a minimum around wildlife casualties, with the use of remote and hidden cameras to capture wildlife taking priority over direct filming. Staff and presenters should avoid being interviewed in the presence of wildlife casualties to prevent additional stress on the animals.

## **Conclusion**

The BWRC requests that production teams recognise that wild animals undergoing rehabilitation are not suitable for studio appearances and that doing so causes unnecessary suffering. We also call on rehabilitators to commit to not supplying animals for display.

## References

1. Fischer CP, Romero LM. Chronic captivity stress in wild animals is highly species-specific. Vol. 7, Conservation Physiology. Oxford University Press; 2019.
2. Morgan KN, Tromborg CT. Sources of stress in captivity. Appl Anim Behav Sci. 2007 Feb 1;102(3–4):262–302.