

# The Impact of Public Demand for Information and Assistance with Wildlife in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Region on Local Entities



Eastern cottontail rabbits, approx. 10 days old

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**Abstract:** Wild animals in cities and suburbs sometimes conflict with people, and human activities sometimes harm these animals. In these situations, residents demand information and action. Local animal care, control, and sheltering professionals and wildlife rehabilitators report that this demand is significant; however, little data have been collected.

The Metropolitan Washington (D.C.) Council of Governments (MWCOC) animal services committee, wildlife subcommittee surveyed public and private entities in MWCOC jurisdictions about public demand for information and assistance with wildlife. The survey asked about the quantity and nature of public demand and how these entities responded to that demand.

Our findings confirm that there is large public demand in MWCOC jurisdictions for information and assistance with wildlife questions and concerns. This demand falls unevenly on public and private entities with varying missions and resources. Animal care, control, and sheltering agencies and wildlife rehabilitators bear much of the demand, including much that falls outside their missions and funding.

**Key Words:** wildlife, urban wildlife, human-wildlife interface, public agencies, wildlife rehabilitators, information services, public education

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, urban and suburban areas grew and engulfed formerly rural landscapes and many wild species adapted to living in cities and suburbs (Hadidian and Smith, 2001). The US Census Bureau classified nearly 80 percent of Americans as urban residents at the last census (US Census Bureau, 2000). Urban Americans have different attitudes towards and expectations about wild animals than our rural ancestors. They are more likely to value wildlife that they do not consume; are less likely to participate in consumptive activities such as hunting, fishing, or trapping; are not usually prepared for living close to wild animals; and are conditioned to expect government services for many routine and urgent needs (Manfredo and Zinn, 1996; Lindsey and Adams, 2006). The urban public wants different information and assistance than traditional constituents of government agencies. Traditional constituents mainly sought greater consumptive opportunities and assistance with agricultural damage from wildlife (Decker and Brown, 2001). The urban public seeks information on and assistance with attracting wildlife and creating backyard habitat; potential effects of wildlife on human and companion animal health; non-agricultural conflicts; and injured or orphaned wild animals (Lindsey and Adams, 2006).

Urban residents have little basic information about wildlife before a conflict arises (Adams, Thomas, Lin, and Weiser, 1987; Kellert and Berry, 1987; Hunter and Rinner, 2004). Once a conflict arises, many people perceive an urgent need but do not know who to contact for help (Reiter, Brunson, and Schmidt, 1999). In consequence, the public turns to a variety of private businesses, organizations, individuals, and state, local, and federal government agencies.

Attention has been given to the impact of demand related to urban wildlife on state and federal wildlife agencies and wildlife management professionals (Lindsey and Adams, 2006; Messmer, 2009). There has been little attention, however, to the impact on local government agencies and local private organizations. Urban residents who rarely hunt, trap, or fish, have very little first-hand familiarity with wildlife agencies and professionals. Local municipal agencies and private organizations and businesses are often the first or only resource contacted for any animal

concern, regardless of whether the species is domesticated or wild. These local agencies and organizations include municipal animal care and control agencies and private animal sheltering organizations whose mission and funding is focused on domestic animal species as well as wildlife rehabilitators. Anecdotally, these agencies, shelters, and rehabilitators report that the public demand for help with wildlife is substantial and growing.

In 1997, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) surveyed humane agencies and animal shelters throughout the US about their involvement with and handling of wildlife. Although their missions focus almost exclusively on companion animals, nearly all (93 percent) dealt with wild animals in some capacity. About 60 percent of these handled more than 500 contacts and/or animals a year; some well in excess. Nearly three-quarters handled more than 100 contacts and/or animals a year. Most (87 percent) reported that they took in some wild animals. Nearly all that dealt with wildlife provided telephone assistance or advice. Most referred callers to others, with a high percentage referring to wildlife rehabilitators. Nearly all (94 percent) reported that they euthanized wild animals under at least some circumstances. (The HSUS, 1997. Unpublished data.)

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOCG), an independent, nonprofit association, is a regional organization of Washington, D.C., area local governments and area members of the Maryland and Virginia legislatures, the U.S. Senate, and the U.S. House of Representatives. An animal services technical committee advises MWCOCG's Human Services and Public Safety Policy Committee on animal matters. In common with animal care, control, and sheltering professionals elsewhere, it is the experience of members of the animal services committee that public demand for information and assistance with wildlife concerns is substantial and growing; taking resources from the work they are mandated and funded to perform. Therefore, the wildlife subcommittee of the animal services committee undertook a survey of entities in MWCOCG jurisdictions impacted by this public demand to better understand the quantity and nature of public demand and the responses on the part of local entities.

## **Methods**

A list of public and private entities who receive wildlife-related calls from the public was developed. Animal care and control (ACO) and animal sheltering agencies and organizations were identified by MWCOCG animal services committee members. State and local health departments, state and local police, state wildlife agencies, and US Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services state offices were included on the list. Lists of permitted wildlife rehabilitators were obtained from the Maryland and Virginia state permit issuing offices. (No rehabilitators were permitted in the District of Columbia.) Since the state lists are not updated frequently they were compared to membership lists of two voluntary associations of rehabilitators (International Wildlife Rehabilitators Council (IWRC) and National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA)) for most current information on member rehabilitators. The Maryland state office that regulates fee-for-services business that deal with wildlife, nuisance wildlife control operators (NWCO), provided a list of NWCO within Maryland MWCOCG jurisdictions. The Virginia state agency was not able to furnish a similar list for NWCO in that state, therefore, NWCO in Virginia were not included. National animal welfare organizations also receive calls about wildlife problems because a number have local headquarters or offices and were included.

All the entities identified as potential respondents were contacted by phone to explain this effort and request their participation. Follow-up calls were made to potential respondents not reached initially. Surveys were mailed, faxed, or e-mailed (as respondents preferred) to potential respondents who agreed to participate beginning in March 2004 and continuing through September 2004. Survey recipients who had not returned a survey within a month were called up to two times to encourage response.

The survey asked 43 questions. Ten questions identified and described each respondent. Two questions were asked only of police about issues specific to field euthanizing deer. The remaining questions asked respondents to report the volume and nature of public demand for information and assistance with wildlife and how each entity responded to that demand. Table 1 summarizes survey distribution and response by category of respondent.

Respondents were grouped into six categories for analysis:

- Animal Care and Control and/or Sheltering Organizations (ACO/Shelters),
- Rehabilitators,
- Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators (NWCO),
- Police,
- Other Government Agencies, and
- Other Organizations.

A complete report of the survey results was included in the report *Wildlife in the Washington Metropolitan Region: Public Demand for Information and Assistance* prepared by the wildlife subcommittee and adopted by the animal services committee in November 2008.

## **Findings**

Table 2 summarizes the total and median numbers of calls respondents reported receiving from the public seeking information and assistance with wildlife questions. Our 65 respondents reported receiving more than 140,000 calls annually for help with wildlife. ACO/Shelters reported the largest volume of calls per respondent; Rehabilitators reported the second largest volume. NWCOs reported the smallest volume of calls.

The survey singled out two common types of wildlife concerns, nuisance wildlife and orphan wildlife. Nearly all calls about orphan wildlife were reported by Rehabilitators (71 percent of all orphan call reported) and ACO/Shelters (26 percent of all orphan calls reported). Although NWCO businesses are devoted exclusively to handling nuisance wildlife, per respondent, ACO/Shelters reported receiving the most calls about nuisance wildlife (median of 450 calls per respondent). Other Government Agencies received more calls, both in total (9,574 total calls) and per respondent (median of 60 calls per respondent), and Police more calls per respondent (median of 75 calls per respondent) about nuisance wildlife than NWCOs (2,627 total calls, median of 30 calls per respondent). These results suggest that the public turns to local governments and private wildlife rehabilitators rather than fee-for-service businesses for help with nuisance wildlife.

Respondents were asked to rank how frequently they received calls about five typical wildlife concerns (Animal in Yard; Animal in Chimney, Basement, Attic, Etc.; Injured Animal; Animal Behaving Strangely; and Babies that Seem to be Without Mother). A rank of 5 indicated the concern was most frequent and 1 indicated least frequent. Table 3 presents the average rankings. Animal in Yard received the highest average ranking from all respondents, closely followed by Injured Animal indicating these were the most frequent concerns. Animal Behaving Strangely received the lowest average ranking indicating this was the least frequent concern.

Respondents were asked to cite up to five wild animal species or groups generating the most frequent demand. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of respondents citing each species or group. Not surprisingly, animals common in the Washington metropolitan area, specifically birds other than waterfowl, raccoons, and squirrels, generated the most frequent demand.

Respondents were asked to describe how they responded to the five typical concerns they ranked for frequency (Animal in Yard; Animal in Chimney, Basement, Attic, Etc.; Injured Animal; Animal Behaving Strangely; and Babies that Seem to be Without Mother). Based on the open-ended responses given by 33 respondents, common categories were developed and responses tabulated (Table 4). Typical responses reported by each category of respondents tended to mirror each category's mission and typical activities (i.e. NWCO frequently responded by trapping, ACO/Shelters frequently responded by dispatching to the site). The exception was that rehabilitators overwhelmingly respond by educating callers rather than by taking animals into care.

Only slightly more than one-third of respondents (23 of 65 who answered this question) reported they held the necessary federal Migratory Bird Permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service to directly aid or euthanize nearly all species of birds. A significant proportion of rehabilitators (14 of 23 responding) and half the ACO/Shelters (5 of 10 responding) held Migratory Bird Permits. The majority who did not hold permits reported that they refer calls that require direct aid or handling of protected species; most frequently to rehabilitators.

Respondents were asked about their efforts to education the public, other than when responding to callers, about ways to prevent nuisance situations and conflicts. Slightly fewer than half the respondents reported that they distributed educational materials to prevent nuisance complaints about wild animals (45 percent) or engaged in other public education efforts to this end (49 percent). Public education efforts cited by respondents included maintaining websites; tabling at community events; distributing newsletters, press releases, flyers, brochures, and public service announcements; writing letters to the editors of newspapers; and making presentations at school.

A long-standing practice among animal care and control agencies to deal with public demand for help with wildlife has been to loan or rent live traps. Less than one-quarter of all respondents, but half of ACO/Shelters, reported that they loan or rent traps. Of the 15 respondents who stated they loaned traps, 10 reported that captured wild animals are always or sometimes euthanized.

Of respondents who directly handle wild animals who were euthanized, slightly more than half (55 percent) reported that they euthanized animals themselves. For those respondents who reported they did not euthanize, 21 percent reported animals were euthanized by a veterinarian,

17 percent reported they were euthanized by a shelter, and 7 percent reported they were euthanized by a rehabilitator.

Respondents were asked if they had to euthanize healthy wild animals due to a lack of other options. Just over half of those who answered (51 percent) reported that they did euthanize healthy wild animals for this reason. ACO/Shelters (78 percent) and Police (75 percent) were the most likely to report euthanizing for lack of options; Rehabilitators (29 percent) were the least likely. Sixty-four percent of NWCO reported euthanizing for this reason.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they informed involved members of the public (i.e. customer of NWCO, complainant notifying police of downed deer in road, citizen bringing animal to shelter or rehabilitator) that an animal would be killed. Most (93 percent) answered that they did share this information. All of the few respondents who did not share the information that an animal would be killed were NWCO.

## **Discussion**

We found that there is large public demand for information and assistance with wildlife questions and concerns in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., region. This demand is falling on a patchwork of public and private entities with varying missions and resources. Demand is particularly heavy on ACO/Shelters who are generally tasked and funded to deal with wildlife only in specific limited circumstances (i.e. suspected rabies cases, bites). The second largest volume is reported by rehabilitators. Rehabilitators' mission of helping individual animals return to wild lives is consistent with helping people deal with injured and orphaned wild animals. At the same time, they are also bearing much of the demand generated by nuisance wildlife not as directly related to their mission.

Significant volume of demand also falls on Other Government Agencies and Police. Considering these together with ACO/Shelters, local public agencies receive a great deal demand. By bringing these concerns to local public agencies, it can be inferred that many members of the public see their wildlife concerns as matters of public responsibility that should be addressed at their local community level. This is consistent with earlier research. Mankin, Warner, and Anderson (1999) reported that more than one-third of Illinoisans in their survey believed their county and/or city should regulate and control wildlife. Reiter, Brunson, and Schmidt (1999) found half the respondents of a national survey felt city or county government should have responsibility for controlling wildlife damage.

Our survey found that common situations and common animals generated most demand. The frequent demand for information and assistance when an animal was merely seen in a yard, a situation that rarely represents a significant threat to people or property, deserves particular notice. Many members of the public continue to call about seeing animals who are acting normally. This may be because they retain out-dated or misunderstood information that suggests merely seeing the animal is enough to indicate the animal is sick and/or dangerous. Basic education on common wildlife species more generally communicated in advance of sighting would be beneficial by reducing this unnecessary demand.

The role of referrals in driving up apparent volume of demand is not measured here but may be an important factor in overall volume. It is a common tale that when a caller finally reaches someone with an answer that caller has already talked with someone else, often several someones, who could not help but suggested other phone numbers. In the specific case of migratory birds, the volume of calls may be driven up, in part, by legal restriction that requires referral to Migratory Bird Permit holders. The finding that Rehabilitators are second to ACO/Shelters in the volume of demand received may reflect the degree to which others refer the public to rehabilitators. The survey did find that referring was the most common response for calls about orphaned young wildlife, a concern which is best addressed by rehabilitators.

Typical responses reported to each of the typical concerns were generally appropriate for the nature of each concern. However, trapping was not an uncommon response to Animal in Yard; primarily from NWCOS. While the most common response to an Animal in Yard was to educate the caller, the use of trapping in this situation that very infrequently presents any real threat to human health or property suggests that some animals are being unnecessarily and inappropriately removed. Further, although the numbers were unmeasured by our survey, some of these trapped animals were reported to be taken to ACO/Shelters or others to be euthanized placing additional unquantified wildlife-related demand on these entities.

Only Rehabilitators reported a strong tendency to respond by educating callers. Further, less than half the respondents reported that they undertook pro-active public education to prevent conflicts. These findings suggest that public education that might reduce the volume of demand is not currently being conducted as widely as would be most beneficial.

One result was that many of our respondents kill healthy wild animals due to a perceived lack of other options. A large minority of our respondents report they do not euthanize wild animals themselves. This demand for euthanization services adds to the burden the ACO/Shelters and Rehabilitators category is bearing to meet the overall public demand for assistance with wildlife concerns, as well as placing demand on private veterinarians.

The role of local municipal agencies, especially animal care, control, and sheltering agencies, and local non-governmental organizations and individuals in addressing public demand related to urban wildlife deserves more attention. This small effort where we looked at impact of public demand in one metropolitan region demonstrates that local animal care and control agencies, local shelters, and local rehabilitators are fielding significant volumes of calls from the public and handling many wild animals. However, they are not typically included when impacts of urban wildlife are studied. Wildlife agencies and wildlife professionals have started examining the impact of the complex matrix of urban wildlife and urban publics on their own agencies and profession. These efforts would be significantly improved by including other animal-related agencies, organizations, and professions when examining urban wildlife impacts and, further, in planning efforts to better address the public demand generated by urban wildlife.

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Table 1  
Surveys Distributed and Returned by Category

Category	Number Distributed	Number Returned	Response Rate (%)
Rehabilitators	70	23	32.9
NWCO	86	15	17.4
ACO/Shelters	19	10	52.6
Police	7	6	85.7
Other Government Agencies	15	6	40.0
Other Organizations	5	5	100.0
All Categories	202	65	32.2

Table 2 Volume of Calls Received from the Public for Information and Assistance with Wildlife

All Wildlife Calls	
ACO/Shelters (10)	
Total annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	45,443
Median annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	965
Rehabilitators (21)	
Total annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	77,776
Median annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	540
Other Government Agencies (6)	
Total annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	12,117
Median annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	300
Police (6)	
Total annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	1,385
Median annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	131.5
NWCO (14)	
Total annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	3,184
Median annual number of calls reported by all respondents in category	70
All Respondents (60)	
Total annual number of calls reported by all respondents	140,935
Median annual number of calls reported by all respondents	275

Number in parentheses following category name indicates number of respondents in that category who answered the question.

Table 3  
Average Frequency Ranking of Typical Wildlife-Related Calls  
5 Being Most Frequent and 1 Being Least Frequent

Average Ranking of Typical Calls					
	Animal in Yard	Injured Animal	Animal in Chimney, Basement, Attic, Etc.	Babies that Seem to be Without Mother	Animal Behaving Strangely
All Categories (58)	3.4	3.3	2.9	2.9	2.1

Number in parentheses indicates number of respondents who answered the question.

Table 4 Number of Respondents Reporting Each Response to Public Inquiries about Specific  
Types of Concerns

	Educate Caller	Respond if Sick	Advise to Leave Alone	Trap	Refer Calls	Dispatch to Site	Take to Facility for Care	Do not Respond and Other Responses
Animal in Yard	14	3	5	5	3	0	0	3
Injured Animal	0	2	0	1	5	6	14	5
Animal in Building	10	0	0	7	10	4	0	6
Babies that Seem to be Without Mother	10	0	6	0	4	0	5	8
Animal Behaving Strangely	8	0	1	3	8	7	0	6
All Concerns	42	5	12	16	30	17	19	28

Respondents could indicate multiple responses.

Figure 1 Percentage of All Respondents Citing Species or Group as Callers' Top Concern

