

DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center Intake Guidelines

Frequently Asked Questions

Each year DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center at Willowbrook Forest Preserve (formerly called Willowbrook Wildlife Center) treats over 10,000 native wild animals. As the Forest Preserve District prepares to open a new treatment and research center, it is prudent and necessary to reevaluate overall operations, protocols, and resource allocations. This review included the center's practice of rehabilitating raccoons. After studying and analyzing both environmental research and the center's current intake numbers, the Forest Preserve District decided to no longer rehabilitate this species.

Why does DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center no longer rehabilitate raccoons?

There are more raccoons living in Illinois today than when the first European immigrants arrived here centuries ago. It's now common to have from nine to 45 raccoons per square mile in Illinois and 98 to 101 per square mile in the fall. Based upon these statistics, the species is overly abundant and not in need of rehabilitation or human intervention. Like many other animals, raccoons have successfully adapted to our urban environment.

Raccoons are a top predator of many birds, reptiles, and amphibians — many in greatest need of conservation. They commonly eat the eggs and young of these sensitive species. They also transmit disease-causing organisms to other species. Because of the large populations of raccoons, they can seriously affect other wildlife.

It also takes a lot of time and space to rehabilitate raccoons, resources that take away from the treatment of other wildlife. Depending on their age, orphaned raccoons can need significantly more care. They require a lot of labor-intensive "training" to mimic the great deal of time their mothers spend in the wild teaching them survival skills. Additionally, because raccoons carry diseases that easily spread to other wildlife, the enclosures they inhabit cannot be used by other types of animals once the raccoons are released. By not accepting raccoons, the Forest Preserve District can dedicate more time to a wider variety of wildlife, including more vulnerable, rare, endangered, and threatened species.

How will the decision to no longer rehabilitate raccoons affect the natural balance of the ecosystems within DuPage County forest preserves?

According to Dr. Kristen Page, a biology professor and the department chair at Wheaton College who specializes in zoonotic diseases, specifically raccoon roundworm and how it can be mitigated in public green spaces, "The decision to stop rehabilitating about 50 raccoons per year would not have a significant impact on the raccoon population, but it could have a significant impact on more vulnerable species, ranging from Blanding's turtles to ground-nesting birds to vulnerable populations of amphibians and reptiles. Releasing rehabilitated raccoons into the forest preserves could put any of these smaller, more vulnerable populations at risk of increased predation."

Will the decision to no longer rehabilitate raccoons harm the population of raccoons in DuPage County?

No. As Dr. Page further notes, “The decision not to rehabilitate raccoons is congruent with the strong conservation plans of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. It will not put raccoon populations at risk, and it decreases the predation risk of many other species in our forest preserves.”

Prior to this operational change, how many raccoons did DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center treat and release each year? How many animals will you be turning away?

Historically the DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center had accepted between 300 and 400 raccoons per year with an average release rate of 40 to 70 animals. That was a 16.8% release rate, which was 20% lower than the center’s overall release rate. The remaining 83.2% were euthanized upon admission due to diseases such as distemper.

But isn’t protecting wildlife part of the Forest Preserve District’s mission?

The Forest Preserve District’s mission is to “acquire and hold lands containing forests, prairies, wetlands and associated plant communities ... for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauty ...” However, its Wildlife Policy Ordinance #20-192 states it “shall manage populations of wildlife for natural densities and levels of variation” while ensuring “densities of endangered or otherwise rare species are sufficient for maintaining viable populations.”

Because the Forest Preserve District propagates and releases endangered and threatened species and because raccoons prey on these species, rehabilitating raccoons conflicts with this ordinance and the mission of the District.

Since 1915 the Forest Preserve District has restored natural areas in DuPage County wetlands, woodlands, prairies, rivers, lakes, and ponds. These historic investments are the largest driving factor in support of the District’s mission. Providing healthy and diverse habitats for as many plants and animals as possible secures the opportunity for less-common species and rare, endangered, and threatened species to flourish. Forest Preserve District staff partners with both the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on numerous species propagation programs. No longer rehabilitating raccoons provides more space and time for successful rare-species propagation programs.

Isn’t the Forest Preserve District building a new bigger wildlife center?

The Forest Preserve District is building a new treatment, research, and visitor center with larger and more modern treatment and surgery areas, but the number of animals it can treat will remain the same.

Is there anywhere else I can bring an injured or orphaned raccoon?

Some private rehabilitators treat raccoons, but the number has decreased in recent years due in large part to the time it takes to ready an orphaned raccoon for release.

The [Illinois Department of Natural Resources website](#) has a list of licensed rehabilitators.

What will happen if I bring a raccoon to DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center?

If you are unable to find a local rehabilitator to take the raccoon, staff will humanely euthanize the animal. Raccoons commonly carry viruses that are similar to those found in domestic pets, such as canine distemper, so this practice reduces the risk that viruses will spread between raccoons and pets if the two species interact.

Are raccoons bad?

No. Raccoons are an important component to a healthy ecosystem. They prey on insects and rodents, which keeps populations of these smaller animals in check. They also eat plants, spreading seeds through their scat.

Raccoons do not typically pose health risks to humans, but large populations or individuals that are in close contact with people can cause problems. Raccoons can carry rabies as well as canine distemper and parvovirus, which can infect domestic dogs and cats. Raccoons can also have parasitic infections, including roundworm and tapeworm, which can infect humans.

Does the Forest Preserve District plan to implement a raccoon removal program in the preserves?

While other local agencies have removal programs, the District is not planning to implement a removal program at this time.

What other species does the Forest Preserve District not accept at DuPage Wildlife Conservation Center?

The center does not accept the following species, but staff can perform diagnostic assessments and provide triage, medical, and surgical care for animals on the list if the animal is undergoing care with a licensed rehabilitator.

Skunks and Bats: Illegal to rehabilitate in Illinois. Will accept for euthanasia if non-releasable within 24 hours.

Raccoons: Will refer to another licensed rehabilitator. Will accept for euthanasia if transfer cannot be obtained.

White-Tailed Deer: Not licensed to treat. Will refer to licensed rehabilitator. Will accept for euthanasia if transfer cannot be obtained.

Healthy Nuisance Trapped Mammals: Illegal to trap without a license. Homeowner should release where found.

Native Mammals and Birds Raised as Pets: May be accepted for care on case-by-case basis. Will make effort to reverse any taming if possible. Will accept for euthanasia if transfer to a licensed captive care facility cannot be obtained.

Domestic or Exotic Pets: Refer to appropriate rescue organization or humane society.

Feral Mammals and Birds: Refer to appropriate individual or organization.

Nonnative Reptiles and Amphibians: Refer to appropriate individual or organization. Will accept red-eared sliders for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained. Staff can make exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Nonnative Birds (pigeon, European starling, house sparrow): Will attempt to find care for all nonnative birds that have been misidentified and admitted by staff. Refer to appropriate individual or organization. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Nonnative Gamebirds: Refer to appropriate individual or organization. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Nonnative Rodents (house mouse, Norway rat): Refer to appropriate individual or organization. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Mute Swans: Refer to appropriate individual or organization. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Hybrid Mallards: Refer to appropriate individual or organization. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Fish and Invertebrates: Refer to appropriate individual or organization.

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