

Title: There is no such animal as a Seagull: How to Design and Implement Volunteer Training Programs for the Wildlife Rehabilitation Organization

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In common usage, members of various gull species are often referred to as *sea gulls* or *seagulls*. This name is used by the layman to refer to a common local species or all gulls in general, and has no fixed taxonomic meaning. -Wikipedia

Introduction

Perhaps learning the correct taxonomic definition of gulls is not the most important skill a new volunteer needs to learn when entering the world of wildlife rehabilitation. In fact, it really does not matter if they refer to all 44 varieties of the *Laridae* family as “seagulls.” However, it is imperative that they understand the difference between scientific facts and common misnomers.

Before learning the real truth behind these myths, a new volunteer needs to know where to park their car, hang their coat, and where to stand so they can observe without being in the way. Only then can you begin teaching a volunteer everything they need to know about wildlife rehabilitation.

A pilot training program was designed and tested at Project Wildlife. Project Wildlife is a large wildlife rehabilitation organization based in San Diego County, CA. The pilot program began in January 2007, and concluded in December 2007. In the 365 days the pilot training program took place, over 10,000 animals, made up of 300 different species, were cared for by more than 250 wonderful volunteers. Throughout this manual, there are many references to Project Wildlife, so it is important to know about the organization’s structure and set-up.

Project Wildlife in a Nutshell:

(2006 statistics)

- 10,000 animals per year
- 300 species (birds and mammals)
- 4,000 square miles of coastal and desert habitat
- 140 caring volunteers and 5 FTE staff at the central facility
- 102 volunteer homecare satellites
- 3 administrative staff
- 7 board members
- 32 years in operation
- 0 formal training programs
- 12 hour days, 7 days a week at the facility
- \$400,000 operational budget
- 100% privately funded
- Permitted by California Fish and Game, US Fish and Wildlife, and US Department of Agriculture

Structurally, the central hub of Project Wildlife (PW) is the Care Center, a doublewide trailer parked on a dead-end road in the warehouse district of San Diego. The Care Center is the “hospital” facility where 80% of the animals are dropped off by members of the public and triaged and cared for at no cost. When the animals are stable, they are transported to a volunteer’s personal

home, which is permitted by the California Fish and Game as a satellite facility, (aka homecare), for long-term rehabilitation and eventual release. Based on location and species, approximately 20% of the animals are brought directly to homecare sites. Currently, there are 102 active PW satellite facilities which are spread over more than 4,000 square miles. All volunteers interested in running satellite facilities from their homes must first work at the Care Center, a process that in the past occurred after just 10 hours of hands-on training.

In the busy season, April-September, the Care Center is open 12 hours a day, and is staffed by 7 part-time managers who fill the roles of veterinary technicians. With no licensed medical staff present, and none required by law, the managers make all medical decisions based on protocols established by an off-site consulting veterinarian. Volunteers are asked to commit to a 4-hour shift once a week. In order to provide proper care for animals at the Care Center, it takes at least 8 skilled volunteers per shift with 3 volunteer shifts per day and 21 shifts per week, PW requires a minimum of 168 trained, dedicated, and reliable volunteers to function. Volunteers operating homecare sites are required to give PW animals 24-hour care, 7 days a week, ranging from 1 to 50 animals at a time.

Volunteers range from 15 to 70 in age, with the majority of volunteers in the 40-55 year range. While the majority of participants are women, a handful of men can be found throughout the organization. Many couples or family groups will volunteer together, particularly when homecare situations are being pursued. Almost half of the volunteers have full time jobs, while the other half are full-time students. The overwhelming majority of volunteers have a college or graduate school education.

The organization was built by volunteers and continues to run on the backs of volunteers; without them, like so many wildlife rehabilitation groups across America, Project Wildlife would collapse. A handful of volunteers have been with Project Wildlife for over 20 years, but the attrition rate for new volunteers is over 60%. The highest drop out rate occurs within the first three months with the first significant rate of drop out occurring at week five.

Based on a survey of former PW volunteers, the largest complaint was the lack of training and personal growth they experienced during their experience as a volunteer.

Why train your volunteers?

Feeding a hungry baby bird may not appear to be difficult. However, knowing how much to feed it? How often? What is the right diet? Using what equipment? How to keep it sterile? Do you put it with other birds or keep it by itself? Light or darkness? Humidity, temperature? Handle it or not? And so on...

And the answers are different depending on the species. Imagine how many different answer combinations are possible when dealing with 300 species. If you spent all day looking up the answers in a manual, the birds would starve. Starving baby birds is not the recommended method for increasing volunteer retention.

Essentially, you cannot entrust the lives of your patients in the hands of an uneducated volunteer without a little training. They need to know how to identify a species, and to be able to provide it with adequate care, calculating in injury, age, and time of year.

Do you just throw them into the mix and cross your fingers? It is what you feel you have to do when you have 200 peeping hungry babies in the nursery and 6 Rubbermaid bins with a clutch of a

dozen ducklings in each, and 70+ new animals being brought to the front door everyday. Oh, and, four of your seven volunteers did not show up for their shift as scheduled, not that you have time to call in backups, so you just hope the next shift shows up early by some miracle.

What really happens when the brand new volunteer walks in the door for the very first time? You throw them in. Some stick with the program and come back for their second shift feeling the ultimate ego rush of being allowed to operate independently, others flee in panic, and refuse to answer their phone when you call to find out why they have not shown up for the last three weeks.

New volunteers come from a variety of different backgrounds, including hopeful veterinary students, aspiring high school graduates, housewives, retirees, and even socialites to name a few. This means it is essential to have a number of learning styles to appease to a wide range of individuals.

We need to achieve consistency in the medical care being provided by the volunteers to the animals put in their care, be it at the triage facility where there is one staff member to every 20 volunteers, or in homecare where the individual is solo. Standardized education and training programs provide the cornerstone for the development of knowledgeable and committed volunteers. Without it, a volunteer may not know if they are addressing the right issues or if they have the skills they need for the situation in front of them. How can a supervisor or a mentor evaluate the new volunteer to know if they have learned what they need to know before being sent home with their first batch of patients?

Every skill that a volunteer will use in the rehabbing world will directly affect the health and well being of a wild animal. A simple mistake may result in the death or releasability of that animal. Many volunteers will end up working in an unsupervised environment where they are required to act as a doctor, a nurse, and a mother, providing round the clock care, and relying only on the advice they have been given in their “training” session.

There is resistance to the introduction of a formal training process amongst seasoned volunteers. As with almost all humans, change is not eagerly accepted. Project Wildlife has been operating for over 30 years, and there are volunteers who have been a part of the organization from the ground up. Several long-term wildlife rehabilitators have openly stated that they do not wish to teach the tricks they have learned to the “newbies,” stating a new volunteer must go through the trial and error process themselves.

To a degree, this trial and error method of learning is necessary. Learning how to tube-feed a day old sparrow on paper does not adequately prepare you for the actual process. You can learn to identify the anatomy of a bird on paper, you can label it, you can write out the steps preparing formula and tube feeding. But you cannot adequately learn, without actually performing the task, the perfect finger pressure needed to hold a squirming baby still, or how to properly wrestle a tiny tube into the throat of a bird the size of a peanut.

To experiment with an already standing recipe, temperature, or thickness of the formula, when it has taken a multitude of volunteer’s years to perfect, is not necessary. These basic facts need to be passed on without experimentation. For some people, reading a thick wildlife rehabilitation manual from start to finish is the best way to learn. There needs to be a balance of reading, testing, and hands on practicing. In order to meet this balance, you need more than a manual; you need a training program.

Additionally, no training program can be put into place without a supervisor or a mentor. You cannot learn the practical parts of a skill without the subjects on which to practice, in this case, live animals. In the real situation of wildlife rehab, when the pace is slow enough for a mentor to teach, there are usually few animals to work with. When animals are present, they come in waves, keeping the seasoned rehabber busy with time for only the daily care of the wildlife. This leaves precious little time to train a new volunteer.

The best learning method in this type of environment is a combination of formal training, coupled with hands-on learning. The program you design needs to be presented in such a way that the new volunteer can self-guide him or herself through the process at their own pace. The program needs to adjust to the seasons, and to the experiences a volunteer brings with them. It also needs to be managed by your staff. This means a paid staff.

Designing the Training Program

Do not worry about whether you completely understand key terms in training or whether your plan is "perfect" or not. The key is to get started. Start simple, but start. Do the best that you can for now. There is no perfect plan. You are doing the plan according to your own nature and needs.

It is not important to stick to a plan for the sake of a plan. The plan will likely change as you progress and this is okay. The end result simply needs to be a training program.

To start, you cannot design this program on your own. Designing the program could be a full time job, and you already have one of those. You need to get some of the future mentors involved in the process from the very beginning, but keep the group small. Three to five people will give you plenty of ideas, and a nice taskforce to help with the research, but small enough that the process will not get out of hand.

A good training design begins with an assessment of the learning needs of the volunteers. Your content should be built around the gap between what volunteers need to know to be successful, and what they should already know coming into the organization. How do you find this information? Ask your experienced volunteers, those that have been around for just a year, and those that have just walked in the door.

Depending on how many volunteers you have, how many animals you work with, and how busy your organization gets, you will need to decide how to split up the training program. For Project Wildlife, we decided that a basic introductory training program that all volunteers, regardless of their chosen role in the organization, would have to completed. Once the mandatory program was completed, volunteers would have the option to pursue more advanced and specialized training.

During the design phase (which is closely integrated with the development phase), work backwards. First, list the skills or knowledge you want the volunteers to have learned at the end of the process. Secondly, work in how they should learn these skills, and who should teach them. Generate an outline of what you think you want to cover from the very first moment a volunteer walks in your door to everything they can possibly learn to do three years later. Then break it down into groups including what can be covered in a self-taught manner and what will need to be hands-on. What can be taught to a group, and what will need to be assessed individually. Can you hold workshops? How often do the volunteers help the organization, daily, weekly or monthly? How much do you want them to learn or practice during each shift and how long will each technique take to learn and master? Finally, map out a basic outline.

Once you have your very long list of ideas, start to condense and cut back. Select a moderate level of content; the tendency is to throw in everything you know about a given topic resulting in an overabundance of information where little is retained. The best approach to developing a lean curriculum is being selective - choosing the "need to know" before the "nice to know."

Before you invest any more time, before you start to construct the details of learning each skill, you need to test your outline. Start by getting the opinion of a small group. Ask them to look at your list of ideas to see if they like the order and the way they are grouped. Remember, the plan is ever-evolving. You may find your test group completely tears apart and reorganizes your plan. If that is the case, you need to invest more time into the overall outline and find another test group.

When we first began this process at Project Wildlife, we modified and reworked the basic training outline multiple times. It was not until after the initial implementation that we learned which skills needed to be moved forward or backwards in the training process. It turned out that what we had initially set as the very first skill was the most frustrating for a new volunteer to learn. After evaluating the skill layout, we moved this technique from the first shift to the fifth. By the fifth week, the confidence a volunteer brings with them minimizes the frustration felt when learning a more complex skill. Once you have a flowing outline that makes sense to the majority, it is time to develop the details.

What will the volunteers be able to do when they finish the training program? Your next step is to write a clear task list to answer this question. Without a well-constructed task list, mentors do not know what is to be taught, volunteers do not know what they are supposed to learn, and management does not know what they are investing their dollars in. A task list will form the basis for what skills are to be learned, how well tasks are to be performed, and under what conditions these are to be used

For example, as part of our basic training outline we would want a new volunteer to learn how to clean and sanitize cages. However if you have a varied environment such as that at Project Wildlife, there may be some cages you want cleaned differently than others. There may also be certain cages you want new folks to learn how to clean first. To make it clear to both mentor and trainee, break the section on cleaning and sanitizing into individual, specific tasks:

- Learn which chemical cleaners are to be applied to which types of cages.
- Locate the supplies needed to sanitize a carrier that contained an animal with a zoonotic disease.
- Learn how to operate the steam cleaner and in what situations the steam cleaner is to be used
- Learn how to use the dish sanitizer and syringe cleaning station.

Now you have your training outline and you have assigned a task list to each section of that outline. Now we need to come up with the methods that will be used to teach and evaluate the volunteer's progress in the program.

Using the task list above, we may apply the following methods. For the task of learning which cleaners to use on which cages, we may provide the volunteer with a list of typical cage descriptions, and a list of chemicals and their properties. Their task is then to match the correct cleaner to the correct cage description. For the location of supplies, why not try a scavenger hunt? List the supplies you want them to find and ask them to record the location of each item. The tasks of using the steam cleaner and the sanitizer are clearly participation activities. Are these tools they can learn to use by reading an instruction sheet, or should a demonstration be given by a mentor? If

it is the latter, it is important that a method for the mentor to record their name and the date of the demonstration be provided to track completion of that task.

These methods, a matching list, scavenger hunt, and mentor's signature, are essentially validations that the task was successfully completed; they can also be considered the "test." The major purpose of the test is to promote the development of the volunteer; these are not pass/fail tests. In fact, at Project Wildlife, every workbook must be completed 100% correctly. If a mentor reviews a completed section and finds incorrect submissions, they address those areas with the volunteer. The test ascertains whether the desired behavior changes have occurred following the training activities. If the desired behavior was not achieved, for example, learning how to use the sanitizer, then the instructions must be reviewed and the task practiced again until it is learned correctly.

So now you have the outline, the task list, and some ideas for the methods you want to use for the training. Your next step is providing printed resources that will be utilized and/or shared (e.g. handouts, activity sheets, training manuals, etc.) which gives each person a tangible item to work off of and guide them through the process. A workbook is a combination of both teaching manuals, and activity sheets, which are designed to accommodate the largest diversity of learning abilities.

In total, PW designed four self-led training workbooks:

Level I – Basic Animal Handling A status of Level I Care Center Volunteer is obtained after 10 shifts at the Care Center and the successful completion of the workbook. After obtaining a Level I status, a volunteer will be able to:

- Answer the door and intake small birds
- Identify animals as wild or domestic
- Prepare and maintain Care Center cages/enclosures
- Prepare basic diets and tube feed small birds
- Properly sanitize equipment
- Protect yourself from and identify common diseases
- Start working with baby birds
- Understand rehabilitation rules and regulations

Level II – Advanced Animal Handling A status of Level II Care Center Volunteer is obtained after demonstrating advanced animal knowledge and specific handling skills. After obtaining a Level II status, a volunteer will be able to:

- Intake and handle mammals and large birds (raptors and seabirds)
- Prepare all types of diets
- Monitor weights of animals
- Identify commonly used drugs and calculate their dosage
- Band birds for identification

Level III – Basic Medical Skills A status of Level III Care Center Volunteer is obtained after demonstrating basic medical knowledge and mastering handling skills. After obtaining a Level III status, a volunteer will be able to:

- Complete a physical exam on new intakes
- Determine dispositions for aviary and release
- Collect and prepare diagnostic tests such as throat swabs and fecals
- Administer Sub-Q injections in mammals

Level IV – Advanced Medical Skills A status of Level IV Care Center Volunteer is obtained after demonstrating advanced medical knowledge. After obtaining Level IV status, a volunteer will be able to:

- Run diagnostic tests such as throat swabs and fecals
- Administer Sub-Q and IM injections in both mammals and birds
- Tube feed mammals
- Assist with minor surgeries
- Suture
- Splint

Level I Workbook: Basic Animal Handling

Project Wildlife asks new volunteers for a six-month commitment of a 4-hour shift once a week to take place at the central facility, the Care Center. They must complete the Level I training, a process they can do in just 10 shifts (40 volunteer hours) before they have the option of advancing to homecare or any other off-site aspect of the organization. Volunteers work in groups ranging from 4-8 people per shift supervised by one paid staff member.

A quick study of the past years of Project Wildlife volunteers showed that 50% of new volunteers stop volunteering after just five shifts. Trainings take valuable staff time to organize and supervise. For this purpose, the first five lessons can be taught and supervised by experienced volunteers, the more complex lessons are taught by staff but do not occur until later in the program when the attrition rate is much lower.

Level I is broken down into ten lessons, one lesson per shift. The lessons themselves are then broken down into three parts, critical thinking, identification, and participation. In total, each lesson, all three parts, should take no more than 1 hour of the 4-hour shift, leaving plenty of time for the volunteer to shadow and observe the operations of the day. Bear in mind, all trainings are designed to happen alongside the daily operation of the Care Center so the volunteer may be able to carve out 60 minutes at one time or may be able to work on each task for a few minutes around other activities throughout their shift.

The volunteer is asked to read the background section of each lesson when they first arrive at the Care Center so they understand what they should be focusing on during their shift. As there is a participation activity in each section, it is best to know what to watch for as soon as the volunteer arrives so they can take advantage of any opportunity to complete it.

In addition to the tasks there are several very important factors to note in this workbook. The introduction explains exactly how to use the workbook, where to store it at the end of the shift and why it is being used. There is also a section on where to find reference materials and who to ask for help as well as numerous places for a mentor to sign their name to verify a demonstration or the successful completion of a task. Additionally, the bottom of each page has a space for a staff member to initial that the page has been reviewed and has been completed correctly.

At Project Wildlife, it is not uncommon for volunteers to change their shift on a regular basis. With each person only working one day a week it is not uncommon that a regular Wednesday volunteer will never meet the Monday volunteers. Should a Wednesday person switch to Monday, the Monday crew, particularly the advanced volunteers who are acting as mentors, will need to know where this new person is in their training. A quick look at the signature and initial sections of the workbook will assure the mentor of the skills this person has obtained and where they still need to be assisted.

While you should have your general outlines set for the entire training program from the start, only work on your basic training first. Set it up and implement it, and try it out before you start on the rest of your program. At Project Wildlife, it took a full 9 months for the last of the program to be implemented from the introduction of the first workbook.

Once you have the basic training ready to be used, and it is designed and ready to go, you need one more step. Now you need buy-in from your would-be mentors.

Implementation

To some, this may sound like the easy part, but it is actually the hardest part of the system. Good mentors can make a poorly developed program work well, and a well developed program work great. Bad mentors cannot help any program work.

In an informal training set-up, the experienced volunteers who want to assist will emerge to the front, and the rest will avoid being asked to help. A volunteer's experience is influenced in critical ways by his or her relationship with their mentors. Volunteer retention and quality of service are enhanced when the mentors treat volunteers as valued assets. Alternatively, a mentor that does not enhance the learning environment may scare off a new volunteer. Thus it is critical that when you change the learning program or process, you keep your mentors in mind.

At Project Wildlife, many of the experienced volunteers initially met the idea of having a training program that involved workbooks, or anything that involved quietly reading and writing with heavy resistance. It would take away from the animals in need; cause too much distraction and prevent tasks from getting done in a timely manner. Their resistance was increased when volunteers were informed that it was required for all volunteers, new and old, to complete workbooks. All staff members and volunteers regardless of experience, had to complete Level I. However, experienced volunteers and staff were not required to follow the Level I format as new volunteers would. Instead, they were given the choice to complete the workbook in as little as one shift using past experiences to substitute for required actions.

As expected, the resistance quickly fell away as volunteers began looking through the Level I workbook. As they met questions which were not easily answered without looking in a reference book, they began to realize they did not know where the information could be found, and started to understand just how valuable this program could become. The resistance turned into eager anticipation, and friendly challenges of who would be first to finish.

After just four months, all of the current volunteers had completed Level I, and many had even completed Level II: Advanced Animal Handling. As new volunteers entered the program, every experienced volunteer was able to assist with the use of the new workbooks because they now knew what needed to be done and where information could be found. Cultivating the confidence of the experienced volunteers to assist and work with the new volunteers helped create a social link within the organization, and may in part be to thank for the increased retention rate observed since the introduction of the program.

In the formal training environment, everyone is given a title based on his or her progress in the training program. Aptly named, the volunteers are titled as Level I, II, III, or IV after they have completed each section of the training program. This allows everyone to easily identify who has a certain set of skills and who is still acquiring them.

This program will not work for every individual, just as it will not work for every organization. Assuming it is the path your organization chooses, it is necessary to accept the fact that there will still be some unsatisfied volunteers. You will still have more volunteers than staff, and you will still have animals claiming your time. There is still no one person in charge of training each volunteer. That is up to the individual; they need to self-direct.

A major goal of this program is to create a more self-directive mode of volunteer training. After the initial orientation, new volunteers will begin their weekly shift. On the initial shift, volunteers are handed workbook Level I, and are instructed to begin reading. To some, this may be a turn-off.

The Level I introduction helps explain why it is essential that the new volunteer start slowly. It is also designed to assure the new volunteer that hands-on experience will occur on their first shift and will routinely increase throughout the training program. Included in the workbook is a list of references that indicates where they can be found in the Care Center terminology list, and a map of the facility. The introduction instructs volunteers to seek out managers on duty, introduce themselves, and ask to be paired with a mentor (an experienced volunteer). It also includes direction on when to ask questions and when to alert a mentor that they need a demonstration. Mentors should be aware these actions need to occur, and they are checking in with the new volunteers on a regular basis. Without this step, a new volunteer is likely to disappear.

In the fast-paced environment of a wildlife rehab center during baby season, a new face in the crowd may get overlooked unless they step forward. Too often, we have not realized that a volunteer missed their shift, did not show up, or has not been seen in several weeks. With 150 volunteers on the weekly roster, it is easy to get lost; even easier for a brand new face to never get noticed.

To this end, it is critical that you recognize every accomplishment made, not only by the new volunteer, but by the mentor as well. Keeping them "on task" during the time they are not with you might be a way to keep them engaged. As a volunteer, knowing that you are needed, especially after a long training program, is essential. Whether it's through email, a note via snail mail about their progress, or even a text message, touching base and reminding them that you are counting on them might be a good way to keep them around after training.

Keep reminding new and experienced volunteers why they are there and why they agreed to join the program. You might be doing that already, but it never hurts to remind them of the bigger picture and not let them get bogged down in the minutia of training.

Several actions are taken at Project Wildlife to recognize and encourage the training process.

- An online calendar is posted of the volunteer's shift, their training status is listed for all to see.
- A similar shift schedule is posted at the volunteer lockers also noting their training status.
- Name tags are updated as volunteers complete the levels.
- A weekly email corresponds with all volunteers on various details of the organization and always concludes with congratulations for anyone who has completed a training step that week.
- Discounts to workshops or special invitations are made to those who are further in the training program.

In short, vary the way you recognize accomplishments, it will attract and satisfy the largest population of volunteers. A large, well-trained pool of volunteers will not only make your task as a manager smoother, it will ultimately increase the medical care provided to the animals.

Evaluating the Program

After the volunteer has completed a training program you will want to have them fill out an evaluation form of the program. The evaluation should include how well the information was presented in the program, if they found the training helpful, if there are any areas that need improvement, if anything in the program seemed redundant or unnecessary, and if there are any additional skills that they feel that they need to perform their jobs.

Use the results from your evaluation to help modify and revise the training program. Then evaluate, modify, and repeat. You should never consider your training program to be finished, even without repeated evaluations. Review and update your material every year. You may be surprised how much can change in that time, a title of a staff member, the seasonal trends of your animal intake, or the installation of a new machine that requires a different set of instructions.

If you opt not to formally evaluate your program, sit down with a handful of volunteers who have gone through the process for an open discussion. Just like your sample group when you first started, find out what they liked, what they found hard, and if they have any suggestions of how to improve the program.

And last but not least, ask your volunteers what a seagull is. They should be able to tell you, there is no such animal as a seagull.

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