

# **Willowbrook Wildlife Center Intake Guideline Changes**

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

Each year 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 treating raccoons. After studying and analyzing both environmental research and the center's current intake numbers, the Forest Preserve District has decided to no longer treat this species. The center will continue to take raccoons through the spring and early summer of 2023.

### **Why will Willowbrook Wildlife Center no longer rehabilitate raccoons?**

There are more raccoons living in the state 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.

They simply do not need our help.

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 other sensitive species. They also transmit disease-causing organisms to other species. Because of the large populations of raccoons, they can seriously affect other wildlife.

Additionally, it 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.

### **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.

This wholistic perspective is supported by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council code of ethics statement 10, which reads, “A wildlife rehabilitator should work from a foundation of sound ecological principles, incorporating appropriate conservation ethics and an attitude of stewardship.”

### **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 [IDNR website](#) has a list of rehabilitators in Illinois.

### **What will happen if I bring a raccoon to Willowbrook Wildlife 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.

### **So are raccoons bad?**

No, raccoons are not inherently bad. They 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 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 Willowbrook Wildlife Center?**

#### **Animals From Outside DuPage County**

Willowbrook Wildlife Center does not accept these animals when referrals to licensed wildlife rehabilitators in the appropriate counties are available.

#### **Coyotes and Foxes From Outside DuPage County**

This policy prevents the possible transmission of disease across county borders. Willowbrook Wildlife Center accepts out-of-county coyotes and foxes only for euthanasia and will provide referrals to other rehabilitation centers when possible.

#### **Skunks and Bats**

As mandated by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, to prevent the potential spread of rabies,

Willowbrook Wildlife Center accepts skunks and bats only for euthanasia. Do not attempt to return “healthy-looking” animals to the wild; animals that appear healthy can carry and transmit rabies.

**Adult and Orphaned White-Tailed Deer**

Willowbrook Wildlife Center accepts deer only for euthanasia. Contact your local police department or the Illinois Department of Natural Resources for other options.

**Healthy, Trapped Nuisance Wildlife**

**Injured, Ill, or Orphaned Nonnative Game Birds**

Willowbrook Wildlife Center accepts these animals only for euthanasia. It will provide referrals to other rehabilitation centers when possible.

**Reptiles and Amphibians from Outside DuPage County**

Willowbrook Wildlife Center accepts these animals only for euthanasia. It will provide referrals to other rehabilitation centers when possible.

**Native Wild Mammals or Birds Reared as Pets**

**Introduced Species**

This includes European starlings, English house sparrows, and pigeons.

**Exotic Wild Mammals or Birds**

**Feral Species**

This includes “wild” dogs, cats, ferrets, pigs, etc.

**Pets or Farm Animals**

[For more information](#)