

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.

Why does 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.

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.

<https://www.wildlifeillinois.org/list-of-licensed-wildlife-rehabilitators/>

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?

An attempt will be made to find care for all non-native birds that have been misidentified and admitted by staff.

Staff can perform diagnostic assessment and provide triage, medical, and surgical care as for animals on this list if that 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 hrs.

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

White-tailed Deer: Willowbrook is not licensed to treat white-tailed deer. Refer to another 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. Efforts will be made to reverse any taming if possible. If patient cannot be released, euthanasia will be elected (very low chance for transfer to permitted captive care facility).

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

Feral Mammals and Birds: Refer to appropriate organization.

Non-native Reptiles and Amphibians: Refer to appropriate organization. Will accept red-eared sliders for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained. Animal care staff can make exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Non-native Birds (pigeon, European startling, house sparrow): Refer to appropriate individual on referral list. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Non-native Gamebirds: Refer to appropriate individual on referral list. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Non-native Rodents (house mice, Norway rats): Public may provide care for them. Refer to appropriate individual on referral list. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Mute Swans: Refer to appropriate individual on referral list. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Hybrid Mallards: Refer to appropriate individual on referral list. Will accept for euthanasia if rescue cannot be obtained.

Fish and Invertebrates: Refer to appropriate organization.