

Liberty Wildlife Medical Services

Medical Services
Training Program

• Section Ten •

Well Care Program

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Introduction to Well Care

There are many animals located in the outdoor flights and enclosures at Liberty Wildlife. They may be *education* animals, permanent residents at the facility. They may be *active-rehabs* which are animals that are still in the process of recovery. They may be *non-releasable*; which are animals that have completed their rehabilitation and yet would not be able to survive in the wild.

The active rehab, non-releasable, and education animals must be continually monitored. The program that supports the care of outside wildlife is the Well Care program.

This section will introduce the animals normally seen at the facility. You will learn the four main components of the Well Care program: routine weekly visual examinations, monthly full physical examinations, close-monitoring programs (animal specific), and release preparedness. You will learn the steps to conducting Well Care assessments and routine check-ups as well as common types of close monitoring.

Let's begin!

Visual Examinations

First, as always, keep in mind the timeless medical adage, do no harm. If an animal appears unduly stressed by your observation, stop. If you are feeling uncomfortable, stop. The amount of human interaction that wildlife can tolerate (even from a distance) varies greatly by the species, individual animal, recent history, and even the season or the time of day. Only do what you safely can—for you and the animal.

The purpose of the visual exam is to provide regular monitoring of wildlife using low-stress methods. The visual exam is an extremely important tool and must be conducted thoroughly. Always take your time. In addition to the points discussed in this section, note anything you feel is unusual—even if you don't see the significance at first.

The visual examination focuses on evaluating the animal by observing key indicators. This type of exam can be divided into two separate sections. The first section covers external observations. The second section covers observations that are specific to the animal.

Visual exams will usually be conducted weekly, but may be scheduled more frequently depending on the animal and its condition.

External

There are many important observations you can make that are not directly connected with looking at the animal. First of all, you can determine that the animal is correctly identified and located in the proper enclosure. You can make sure it has been provided with the correct supportive conditions for its enclosure. You can promote its future success by monitoring its medical chart, food intake logs, and even the physical condition of its enclosure.

Prepare

Determine which animal you will be checking. The schedule for the Well Care program is located in a binder on the desk in the bird room. Pull the animal's chart and review it thoroughly before beginning. Take a blank form with you so that you can make notes during the examination.

Identification

Proper identification of wildlife at the facility is critical. This means the species, as well as the log number of each individual animal. Confirm that the appropriate tag is on the outside of the animal's cage. Verify the identification information against the chart. If a tag is not on the enclosure, make one if you can confirm the animal's identity. If you find a discrepancy with the log number or any other means of identification, bring it to the attention of a senior vet tech. It is *very* easy to get these animals mixed-up. Please don't assume identifications, assumptions can cause mistakes!

Enclosure

Check the condition of the enclosure carefully. Look closely at each wall and at the roof to make sure they are free of holes or potential hazards. Look carefully at the floor of the enclosure, too. Ask yourself standard questions on enclosures. Are there any escape routes in this enclosure? Do you see any potential hazards? Are there snags that might catch talons or jesses? Does the enclosure need cleaning? Has old food been removed? Does the surface need changing? Does it need more rock? Is the door functioning properly? Anything that you can correct, fix that day. Any repairs that you are unable to make should be listed on the Repair Log in the bird room.

Perches and Surfaces

Many enclosures must be customized for the animal inside. Make sure that each enclosure you encounter is set up appropriately for the animal it contains. Animals with wing injuries must have ramping systems to allow them access to perches and perches should be lowered to prevent injuries. Make sure food and water are not located below perches as they can become contaminated. Also, make sure that the water is located away the door as it can be a hazard to people entering the enclosure.

The surfaces of perches, their heights, and circumferences should be appropriate for the type of bird. Perches should always be covered with sisal rope, astro-turf, indoor-outdoor carpet, or whatever other product is appropriate. Check perch coverings for loose fibers or hanging material. Follow the length of the perch to make sure there aren't any slits in the wood or other hazards that might catch a talon or toe.

Food

Quite a bit of information can be determined from studying the animal's eating pattern on the food chart. Monitor food intake closely to determine if the animal is eating. Is it being offered the correct food for its species and age? Note the trends that you see. Sometimes animals will eat one kind (or even one size) of food readily and yet leave another untouched. Animals that have been eating well in Intensive Care, may suddenly quit eating when placed outside. Animals that have not been eating well inside may be put outside to see if a less stressful environment will affect their appetite.

Mutes

Don't miss a great opportunity! A bird's "flight or fight" response will often kick-in at the sign of any potential threat, which will be *you* as you make your observations. The animal's first action is usually to mute, to make itself lighter for flight. Take advantage of this reaction to note the condition and color of the mute. It can be a good indicator of possible problems.

Record

Make note of all of your observations.

Animal Observations

After making notes on all of the above external observations, focus your attention on the animal. Much information can be obtained by quietly observing the animal from outside of its enclosure.

Attitude

A good indicator of an animal's condition can be its attitude or demeanor. A healthy animal should appear bright, alert, and responsive. Although it should exhibit the normal aversion to humans, it should not appear unduly stressed in light of its species and condition.

Overall Appearance

Does the animal look as you would expect from viewing the chart? For example, if an animal had a shoulder injury and was just put outside, you might expect that the wing placement might be a little different on the side of the injury. However, if an animal had a shoulder injury and was favoring one foot, it might be an indication of another problem. Observe the animal's feathers carefully. Twisting or ruffled feathers might be a sign of an underlying problem. Is the animal banded?

Perform a head-to-toe visual exam

- The animal's head should be held in a normal position without any unusual or jerky movement or tracking.
- Are its eyes clear? You should not see any crustiness, drainage, cloudiness, blood, lesions, or swelling. If you can see its pupils, are they reactive and equal?
- The beak should be of the proper size and length, not overgrown.
- The wings should be folded correctly without drooping at the joints. As recent injuries can affect wing placement, it is important to understand the nature of the animal's condition.
- The legs should appear healthy for the species and should support the animal evenly.
- Birds often stand with one leg tucked up, so be sure to wait until the animal moves before assuming there is a problem.
- The animal's tail can be a critical factor in its flight ability and agility. Make sure it is healthy and intact.

Movement

- Review the chart. If there are no problems that would limit movement or indicate cage rest, you can continue.
- If you haven't yet seen the animal move, encourage movement *to the degree that the animal is capable*.
- Is it standing on both legs, using both legs equally?
- Does it extend its wings correctly?
- Is the animal flighted? If it is in a flight enclosure, flush it from perch-to-perch and watch it fly. Is it flying well? Does it appear to be compensating in any way? Does it land on both feet normally? Is it hitting its perch?
- Is its breathing labored? Is it taking longer than normal to recover from the activity?
- Birds healing from wing fractures will often have a notation in their chart that says, "put outside and see if it can fly." This process is not as quick and simple as it sounds. An animal that has been in intensive care for any length of time will need several days, or even several weeks, outside in a small or medium enclosure before it is ready for time in a flight. The animal's progress should be monitored carefully as it progresses and, when ready, it should be moved to a larger enclosure.

Estimating Weight / Food Intake

If an animal has been eating regularly and is bright, alert, and responsive, we do not always need to put it through the stress of capture to check its weight each week. When possible, use the food charts combined with other visual indicators to identify potential drops in weight, unless stated otherwise in the chart or on the enclosure.

- A/R or N/R enclosures with one or two birds
 - If there are only a few birds in an enclosure it may be possible to make an acceptable determination
 - If an animal has been eating regularly but does not appear bright, alert, and responsive, its keel should be checked.
 - Use the chart history on that animal to determine what you should expect to find while examining the keel. For example, did the animal arrive very thin, a short time earlier? Does the animal have a wing amputation that is causing muscle atrophy on one side? Was the animal in Intensive Care for a long time and just recently placed outside? Is the animal young and has not yet developed its flight muscles? On a healthy bird of the correct weight, you should be able to feel the proper thickness of muscle tissue on either side of the breast bone for the species.
 - Be sure to record the details of your estimate in the chart. Review the animal's weight history and note any unusual gains or losses.
- A/R or N/R enclosures with a larger group of animals
 - You may not be able to estimate weight from food logs and other indicators.
 - Animals that are not bright, alert, and responsive should be physically checked.
 - Try to "time" physical examinations to check keels or weights so that they coincide with cage movements. For example, moving from a small cage into the 20-foot, from the 20-foot to 30-foot, or from 30-foot to the 60-foot.
 - Record the details of your estimates and observations in the chart. Review the animal's weight history and note any unusual gains or losses.
- Education Animals
 - The same process for estimating an animal's weight using the food charts and other external observations applies to education animals.
 - In order to maintain the animal's training, education animals are weighed when their weights need to be checked.
 - Only staff that are properly trained in the handling procedures for each specific education animal should attempt weighing. You must be trained on the animal and be signed-off to conduct its handling by yourself.
 - *This is crucial to properly maintaining the animal's training.*
 - Weighing procedure for education animals
 - *You must be properly trained.*
 - Select a scale and move it to a suitable surface.
 - Turn on the scale.
 - Using the proper handling technique, bring the bird to the scale.
 - Ask the animal to "step off" onto the scale's perch.
 - Note the animal's weight and record it in the chart.
 - Record the details of your estimates and observations in the chart.
 - Review the animal's weight history and note any unusual gains or losses.

Full Physical Examinations

The full physical examination is a hands-on evaluation which will provide a head-to-toe assessment, the actual gram weight of an animal, and the opportunity to perform any additional procedures such as coping beaks or trimming talons. Repair of ankles and jesses on education animals can be timed to coincide with this examination.

Teamwork!

Full physical exams are accomplished more easily if you work in teams. Try to schedule a time when you and another Medical Services volunteer can team-up to complete one or two exams. This can be done by overlapping shifts on a given day or by having an extra person come in on an “off” day. It’s a good idea to rotate the teams to get input on technique from more than one person.

Prepare

Before you begin, review the animal’s chart with your partner. Discuss things that you might check closely and the conditions you might expect to find. Prepare an examination area in the bird room.

Visual Exam first

Before you remove the animal from its cage, follow the procedure for the visual exam and complete each step. Be sure to record all observations in the animal’s chart.

Capture and restrain

Bring the animal inside the bird room according to procedure. Use additional equipment such as hoods or body socks to help calm the animal during the examination.

Assess

Conduct a head-to-toe assessment:

- Carefully check the feet for any beginning signs of bumble foot or any other injury.
- Apply A&D ointment to the feet.
- Inspect the beak and talons, and cope or trim them if necessary.
- Repair anklets and jesses, or note the needed repair
- Check wings and body
- Check mouth and head

Weigh the animal

Be sure to tare the scale with the weight of any additional equipment such as hoods, towels, or leashes before weighing. Education animals should be weighed from the glove by properly trained staff using the procedure appropriate for that particular animal.

Put animal back

Return the animal to its enclosure as quickly as possible

Record

Record the weight in grams in the chart.

Record the details of your examination in the chart.

Close-Monitoring Programs

A close-monitoring program is needed for any animal that is receiving scheduled treatment or requiring close observation, either ongoing or on a specific schedule. Some examples of close-monitoring programs:

- An animal that is transferred from intensive care and newly placed outside may need to be on close-monitoring for a few days to be sure he is acclimating properly.
- Physical therapy might be ordered to support rehabilitative efforts on an animal that has been injured.
- Animals that are put out with wraps or other bandaging still in place need to be checked regularly for swelling or other problems.
- Animals may need routine observation to determine if they are eating correctly and adjusting well to outdoor active rehabilitation conditions.

It is extremely important to conduct all close-monitoring activities in a timely manner and to record all scheduled treatments and observations in the animal's chart. Animals on close-monitoring programs will have their charts located in the hanging bin labeled "Close-Monitoring Outside". When you arrive for your shift, review the charts that you find there. After reviewing the charts, determine which animals need care during your shift. Also, look on the door of the medicine cabinet for posted treatment schedules for animals outside requiring physical therapy or other scheduled activity.

Physical therapy may be needed in order to return a limb to its former function. Some examples of this might be extending a bird's wing or leg, holding the bird and forcing it to flap wings in a flight motion, or encouraging it to fly from perch- to-perch. The type of activity, range of motion, duration, and frequency for each specific activity will be detailed in the chart and on the posted therapy schedule. Be sure to note the physical therapy on the posted schedule or in the chart once it is completed.

Other treatments such as bandage changing or removal must also be completed on schedule. Again, the type of care needed and frequency will be posted. Note in the chart or on the schedule when you have completed the treatment.

Release Preparedness

The work of many hard-working individuals goes into bringing an animal to the point which it can be released. Although we wish this were the outcome of all of the animals at the facility, the reality is that only about half of them will be returned to the wild. Of the other half, some will die of their injuries and some will have to be euthanized. There will be still others that will complete their rehabilitation and yet be unable to successfully survive in the wild. Whenever possible, these animals are placed in situations that provide a safe and healthy environment for them to live out their lives. These placements include nature centers, education facilities, zoos, breeding facilities, and other environmental programs.

Animals that are returned to the wild must prove that they can successfully survive. There is a system for this process.

Animal Movement

When animals complete their rehabilitation in Intensive Care they are moved outside. Often, this first move is made into an enclosure that continues to restrict their movements to some degree. Once they have successfully adapted to the outdoor environment and their first enclosure, they will be moved to a larger enclosure. Eventually they will be placed in an enclosure where they can demonstrate the skills they will need to survive.

All animal movements must be recorded in the chart. Make sure that the information on tags, bands and charts are correct and that they follow the animal's movement.

Adult Active-Rehabs

Animals must exhibit the abilities they will need to survive in the wild. Only active rehabs are put through this process. Once an animal is determined to be non-releasable it is moved to a low-stress enclosure to await placement.

Active rehabs will need to fly, maneuver, hunt, socialize, and demonstrate any other necessary skills that might be needed for survival. As animals are placed outside, observations should begin.

Medical staff will monitor the animal's progress. Notes will be made to indicate if a bird is flying straight, if it can fly from the ground up to a perch, if it has the maneuverability necessary for its species, if it flies without compensating in any way, and if it does not appear to be winded after periods of exercise. If it is an owl, it should be flying silently as well. It should be able to easily complete an established number of laps in a large flight enclosure.

Orphan Readiness

In the wild young animals are shown how to hunt by their parents as part of their normal development. Although this behavior may be more or less instinctive, orphaned birds of prey must be tested prior to release to insure a successful reintroduction to the wild. This is accomplished by introducing live prey into their enclosure. From the demonstration of a “teacher” bird or foster parent, the youngster learns that the live animal is the same as the dead food it has been provided. The young animal must demonstrate that it can hunt successfully before it can be scheduled for release. In addition, all orphans must all exhibit the correct social behavior by demonstrating avoidance of people to the degree that it is possible in its enclosure.

Specific Species

The success of the Well Care program depends greatly on the knowledge and experience of the person conducting the exam.

It is crucial to become familiar with the wildlife that you will find on the property. This section will list the common wildlife you will encounter. Become familiar with their identification, habits, food preferences, and other conditions that will help you while providing care.

Education Wildlife

In order to respond effectively and correctly to a medical situation involving an education animal, you must become familiar with their species, location, individual history, and commonly shown behaviors.

Start now! Conduct a Well Care assessment on an education animal each shift.

- Select an educational animal to review.
- Read information on the species. There are books in the reference cabinet at Liberty Wildlife. Also, there are many books available in bookstores or in the library.
- Now that you know that natural history of the animal you have selected, pull its chart and read it carefully. Determine when the animal arrived and why. In addition, note its medical history. This information will be valuable for you to know should an emergency arise.
- Taking the chart and your natural history notes, find the animal.
- Study the identifying marks (field marks) of the species on the individual animal so that you can properly identify when that species arrives in the future.
- If the animal shares an enclosure with another individual, learn identification marks to separate it from the others. Identifying characteristics might be size, type or location of injury, behavior, or coloration.
- Learn the natural history, including habitat, food requirements, and behavior of each species. You can properly identify the species should one arrive on your shift.
- Provide the location, species, natural history, medical history, and any additional notes when given that individual’s name.

Medical Services Exam

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1. What are the two approaches to a visual exam?
2. How does a full physical exam differ from a visual exam?
3. When can an animal be released?
4. Name two education animals on the property and give their species, natural history, and original medical problem. Conduct a visual exam on this animal and include the result here and on the animal's chart. Use the back of this sheet for your response.
5. What species is thought to be the most abundant owl in Arizona?
6. What species on the property makes the longest migration?
7. What education animal still has gunshot pellets inside its body? (List the species and name.)
8. How can you tell Butch and Beau apart?
9. What two species are so much alike that you sometimes need a wing chord measurement to be certain?
10. Which is usually bigger, male or female?
 - a. In GHO's?
 - b. In red-tailed hawks?
 - c. In prairie falcons?
 - d. In ravens?
 - e. In turkey vultures?
11. Which falcon(s) can you sex by color?