

Let's make it Zero for our Wildlife Heroes

A Health and Safety Resource for
Volunteer Wildlife Rehabilitators



Wildlife rehabilitation can be rewarding, but it also presents risks. Managing wild animals in distress can be hazardous. Doing so in remote, difficult, or unfamiliar locations, at night, during disasters or in bad weather can be extremely dangerous. Fatigue can be a major factor in accidents when people lose focus and take risks when tired.



Wildlife Heroes
Caring for our Backyard Buddies



Foundation for
National Parks
& Wildlife



NSW
GOVERNMENT

As part of the Wildlife Heroes Program, this project has been assisted by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust.

Purpose of this guide

Wildlife rehabilitators need to know the hazards and risks, and how to stay safe. A hazard is something that can cause harm, while risk is the likelihood of harm from that hazard. Everyone doing rehabilitation work should come home safely every time. This guide aims to help achieve the goal of ZERO safety incidents for wildlife rehabilitators.

Not all possible hazards and ways to stay safe can be listed here. This guide highlights key hazards and common ways to minimise them. The aim is to get people to stop and think about hazards and risks before starting their important work.

Who is responsible for volunteer safety?

Groups should train, equip, and support their volunteers to work safely. It's the right thing to do. Groups with paid staff have a legal obligation to do so.

What about a volunteer's personal responsibility?

As a volunteer you are responsible for taking reasonable care of your own health and safety too. You must follow the group's instructions, policies and procedures. You must ensure your actions don't harm the health and safety of others, like people assisting you with your work or the general public.



What's the best approach for staying safe?

It's called TAKE 5. It takes just five minutes in a five-step process to stay alive and bring everyone home safely every time.

1. **STOP** – take a moment to assess the situation before starting work.
2. **LOOK** – look around and identify hazards. There are usually more than one.
3. **ASSESS** – what is the risk? i.e. The likelihood and severity of the harm occurring? This might range from probable to improbable and significant to slight.
4. **PLAN** – can you do anything to minimise the risk? Plan to deal with each hazard. It doesn't have to be a written plan, but if you are working with others, make sure you all agree on what needs to be done, who will do it and when.
5. **PROCEED** – follow the plan and complete the task safely. Remember to stay alert and adapt the plan if things change while you are working.

Should I tell someone if things go wrong?

Yes. It's important to let your group know if there has been an incident or a near miss. If you have time afterwards it's a good idea to review how things went and whether anything could be done better. Share your thoughts with your group so everyone can learn from your experience. This will help protect you and others in future.



What are some of the hazards and how can I minimise the risk?

What is the hazard?	How do I minimise risk?
Handling animals	Always use the right PPE*, equipment and techniques
Venomous animals, bites, scratches and lacerations	Use PPE*, the right enclosures, capture equipment and capture and handling techniques, have a first aid kit available, know who to call in an emergency.
Lifting heavy animals	Get help from other people, use a trolley, sling or stretcher if available, use correct lifting technique
Zoonotic disease	Use PPE*, get and stay vaccinated, maintain hygiene, be aware of emerging zoonotic diseases
Where you are working	Always be prepared and situationally aware
Traffic or roads	Wear Hi-Vis PPE*, use warning lights and/or traffic signs if available
Driving, especially at night	Take breaks, secure your load, drive to the conditions, confirm your route before attending or leaving the site
Difficult location (e.g., slippery, dark, confined spaces)	Wear the right gear, carry a good torch, use PPE*, be aware of fatigue, take breaks, proceed slowly, use a safety line if available, don't work alone, get help and split up tasks before you start
Height	Ensure ladders have a solid base and placement, have a co-worker spot you, don't go past the top two rungs, don't lift heavy objects from the top of the ladder.
Working alone or remotely	Have a call-in arrangement with someone, carry a communications device on your person appropriate to your location such as telephone, radio or EPIRB**
Tools and equipment	Ensure people are experienced, trained and authorised
Firearms and heavy equipment	Must be appropriately trained and licenced. Stand behind shooter and away from heavy equipment while in motion
Chainsaws, pole saws	Use full PPE*, be aware of electrocution risks and safe operation of equipment. Use only if experienced
Sharp objects	Place needles in sharps container, put away or re-sheath knives or other sharp objects immediately after use
Environmental conditions	Maintain situational awareness and know when to stop
Weather	Use protective measures appropriate to the conditions (hats, sunglasses, sunscreen, raincoats, boots etc). Be aware of fatigue and take breaks. Know the symptoms of heat stress (being too hot) or hypothermia (being too cold). <i>Symptoms include but not limited to:</i> too hot feeling confused or light-headed, high, or low blood pressure, flushed or very pale skin too cold shivering, drowsiness, exhaustion, memory loss, slurred speech
Disaster or pollution events	If responding to a disaster (flood, fire, drought, pollution) obtain advice and approval of the appointed incident control staff before acting. Only experienced or appropriately trained people should be involved. Use appropriate PPE*
Mental Health	Be prepared and know when to stop or ask for help
Burnout, grief, post-traumatic stress	If you feel overwhelmed by the situation, stop, and call for assistance. Do not proceed if you know doing so will damage your mental wellbeing. It is OK to ask for help
Conflict, abuse	If you think you will experience conflict from other people at the work site, plan to stay calm, focusing on the task to be done without engaging with those harassing you, be prepared to walk away and/or call for help from Police or other people before you start.

*PPE = personal protective equipment

**EPIRB = emergency position indicating radio beacon

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BEFORE you start work:



Tick the six – Ask yourself:

1. **Can I maintain awareness of the hazards around me?** – Be continuously aware of the hazards around you as you work. Try to have someone with you if you are in a difficult location or in dangerous conditions. Fatigue can affect your judgement so take breaks when possible.
2. **Do I have appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and aids?** – To prevent injury to yourself when picking up animals; use towels, appropriate carriers and equipment, wear PPE to protect your hands, head, face, eyes, feet and bare flesh.
3. **If required, am I ready to deal with a dangerous or large animal?** – Don't handle bats/flying foxes unless you are vaccinated. Snakes, monitors, emus and large kangaroos should not be handled unless you are trained to do so. Think about asking someone else to help you, use the right aids and maintain good technique when lifting heavy animals.
4. **Am I prepared to prevent bite, scratches and infectious diseases?** – Have a first aid kit ready. Use appropriate PPE. If necessary, wear gloves, long sleeves and head, face and eye protection. Use the right catching and handling techniques. Maintain strict hygiene. Wash wounds and apply antiseptic as soon as possible.
5. **If required, do I have the right equipment and the training to use it?** – Don't take short cuts. Make sure people using heavy, dangerous, or special equipment are experienced, trained and authorised to do so. Keep clear when others are using heavy or dangerous equipment. Have someone spot you when working at heights.
6. **Am I feeling OK to do the job?** – Know that if the situation is too daunting it is OK to ask for help. Plan to keep calm but be ready to walk away and call for help if necessary.

DO NOT PROCEED UNLESS YOU TICK ALL SIX BOXES.

Your own safety comes first. Only assist wildlife when it is safe to do so.