

Volunteers can learn from 'wildlife paramedics' how to handle oily birds

By Shelly Meron
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A little more than a year ago, when the Cosco Busan spilled tens of thousands of gallons of oil into the Bay, residents all over the Bay Area wanted to help birds and marine mammals. But because of the chaos of the cleanup and following investigation, and a lack of formal training for some, many people were unable to do much but watch as the disaster unfolded.

Hoping to prevent the same situation again, two Bay Area nonprofit organizations — WildRescue of Moss Landing and the International Bird Rescue Research Center based in Fairfield — are teaming up to offer several classes in the East Bay in the coming weeks that will teach students how to best help injured or oiled animals and birds.

"Through the years, I've realized that one of the biggest challenges in getting wildlife treatment is getting the finder — the public — to the right place," said Rebecca Dmytryk, who founded WildRescue in 2000. "Out of the Cosco Busan oil spill, I realized there was a lack of information out there, and the public didn't understand the structure in which (the rescue operation) works. This is one way to satisfy the public's desire for knowing what to do and how to help an animal, and encourage them to work within the system."

Dmytryk said the classes are for anyone interested in learning about animal and bird rescue, whether they work with animals regularly or are just animal lovers. Those who participate will learn about natural history, laws and regulations, what equipment to use in rescue, what capture strategies will and will not work, how to stay safe, how to keep animals and birds safe and as calm as possible, and when it is best not to rescue an animal.

"Some animals should not be rescued," Dmytryk said. "It is harmful for some animals with minor injuries to come into captivity and get stressed out."

In addition to her classes, Dmytryk said her organization runs a hot line for those who find an injured animal or bird and are wondering what to do. Those who call the hot line at 866-WILD-911 can indicate what type of animal or bird they've found and enter their area code. The hot line will provide information on the nearest organization that can provide help in that particular situation.

Dmytryk hopes those who participate in the classes will feel more comfortable volunteering with rescue organizations and helping out in disasters such as the Cosco Busan spill, during which she said volunteers were scarce.

"With any natural or man-made disaster, there are never enough skilled people to deal with injured wildlife," Dmytryk said.

Still, Dmytryk emphasized that those who take the classes are not exempt from regulations that govern possession of native wildlife, oiled or otherwise.

State and federal laws prohibit those without the proper permits from handling, transporting or otherwise possessing certain wild animals and birds, their feathers, eggs or nests.

Patrick Foy, a game warden with the California Department of Fish and Game, said anyone who finds injured, sick or oiled animals or birds should first determine whether the animal can and should be helped. Then, Foy said, arrangements should be made with a wildlife rehabilitation center ahead of time to bring the animal or bird in for proper treatment.

"If you're looking at a strict interpretation of the law, it's illegal," Foy said of handling wild animals

and birds without a permit. "Are we going to enforce that when they're trying to help an animal and have called ahead, and a wildlife rescue organization knows an animal is coming? No. We're not going to issue citations for somebody trying to get help for an animal."

If a game warden can verify a person's intention to get an animal help as soon as possible, Foy said there should be no issues.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a similar policy for birds that fall under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

That law prohibits handling or possessing birds, nests, feathers or eggs that fall under the Act without a permit.

But it also contains a good Samaritan exception, said Marie Strassburger, the regional migratory bird chief for the federal agency.

Still, under no circumstance should anyone take a sick or injured bird or animal home and attempt to care for it, Foy stressed.

Dmytryk also emphasized that during a disaster, it's important for people to work within the incident command system typically set up by authorities.

Those who are trained will often be "activated," or called upon during disasters to help with animal and bird rescue operations.

"We respond in the field, on a moment's notice. We evaluate an animal's condition, provide basic medical treatment and stabilization, and transport them to a facility for more care if that's needed," Dmytryk said. "We're like wildlife paramedics."

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