Factors affecting the likelihood of release of injured and orphaned woodpigeons (Columba palumbus)

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Abstract

Very little is known about the fate of the large numbers of injured and orphaned wild animals taken to wildlife rehabilitation centres in the UK each year. We reviewed the reasons for admission and outcomes for 2,653 woodpigeons (Columba palumbus), 68% of which were juveniles, brought to an RSPCA wildlife rehabilitation centre in Cheshire, UK over a five-year period (2005–2009). Reasons for admission varied with the most common reason for adults and juveniles being ‘injury (cause uncertain)’ and ‘orphan’, respectively. Twenty-one percent of adults and 16% of juveniles had been attacked by cats. Sixty-five percent of adults and 37% of juveniles were euthanased on admission or within the first 48 h to prevent further suffering. Only 14% of adults and 31% of juveniles were released back into the wild. The remainder were either euthanased or died despite treatment more than 48 h after admission. Body condition on admission was not a good predictor of the likelihood of release, but age, weight on admission and severity of symptoms were significant factors. A reduction in the median number of days in care for those birds euthanased more than 48 h after being admitted was recorded for 2007 to 2009, possibly due to the introduction of radiography for all birds on admission. Leg-band recovery data for 15 birds revealed post-release survival ranging from 21–2,545 days (median = 231 days) compared to 1–2,898 days (median = 295) for non-rehabilitated birds.

Keywords: animal welfare, Columba palumbus, post-release survival, RSPCA, wildlife rehabilitation, woodpigeon

Introduction

Wildlife rehabilitation, ie “the managed process whereby a displaced, sick, injured or orphaned animal regains the health and skills it requires to function normally and live self-sufficiently” (IWRC 2010), is a large and common international practice which aims to return sick, injured or orphaned wild animals back to the wild. In Britain, there are thought to be approximately 650 wildlife rehabilitation centres (A Grogan, personal communication 2008) and it has been estimated that between 30,000–40,000 wildlife casualties are taken to wildlife rehabilitation centres each year (Molony et al. 2007). However, as no accurate data are collated, this number could be much greater. Such large numbers of wild animals being taken into care annually raises significant welfare concerns since individuals may suffer whilst in captivity and undergoing treatment and very little is known about the fate of these animals either during the rehabilitation process or after release. In addition, wildlife rehabilitation has been criticised as being a waste of time and resources (Sharp 1996; Goldsworthy 2000) and ethically dubious under some circumstances (Kirkwood & Sainsbury 1996). It is therefore vital for wildlife rehabilitators to regularly review their protocols and use data generated over the years to better inform their admissions policy and to enable them to make swift decisions on the future of admitted casualties. It is also essential that rehabilitators demonstrate that the welfare of the animals they are caring for is not compromised by the processes involved. Many wildlife rehabilitators equate release with success (Sharp 1996) and although some studies have focused on post-release survival of rehabilitated wildlife including raptors (Martell et al. 1991; Fajardo et al. 2000; Leighton et al. 2008), oiled seabirds (Sharp 1996; Werner et al. 1997) and mammals such as red foxes (Vulpes vulpes) (Robertson & Harris 1995), Eurasian hedgehogs (Erinaceus europaeus) (Morriss 1998), pipistrelle bats (Pipistrellus spp) (Kelly et al. 2008) and polecats (Mustela putorius) (Kelly et al. 2010) there is a paucity of information on what happens to injured or orphaned wildlife whilst in care. In addition to being injured, wildlife casualties are subsequently exposed to the potential stress of treatment and captivity. Given the large number of animals involved, wildlife rehabilitation could...