

Wildlife: Not Ours to Keep

This wildlife friendly information is sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research. We hope you find the information below useful, and it helps to answer your questions on this subject. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us by clicking this link: <http://www.tvwc.org.au/contact.php>

The primary focus of wildlife carers is the successful rehabilitation of ill, injured or orphaned wildlife back to their habitat, their families, their natural lifestyles.

Ask any wildlife carer and they will tell you their greatest joy is successfully releasing an animal that they have cared for, sometimes for months. Caring for the native animal is a privilege; releasing it back to the wild after its rehabilitation is our duty.

Yet, what about ...

- The young child who finds a baby or juvenile lizard that is kept as a pet, proudly displayed at show-and-tell days at school.
- The possum joey, found in its dead mother's pouch on the side of the road, being handraised and kept in the family's aviary.
- The tadpoles or frog-spawn that are taken from the wild and transferred to someone's pond.
- The collection of the 'nuisance' carpet python from the wild which is then kept as a pet.
- The handraising of a baby bird that has fallen from the nest or is mistaken as abandoned by its parents.



This Pink-tongue skink was taken from the wild by a schoolboy who took it to 'show and tell'. His teacher, a wildlife carer, made sure it went back into the wild.

People are breaking the law when scenarios such as these are played out, often unwittingly.

Many people do not realise that only trained and licensed wildlife rehabilitators may hold native wildlife in NSW. In the Tweed, this means members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, the only group with a licence from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in this region.

Captive vs wild bred

People can obtain private licenses through NPWS to hold native animals such as various species of birds, reptiles and mammals as pets. In fact, in the case of some common species, eg galahs, cockatiels, etc, a licence is not needed at all. However, in all cases, these animals **must** be captive bred, not wild caught animals.

Sometimes there is confusion because of the licensing system. For example, many reptile keepers think that because they have a private reptile licence they are allowed to keep wild reptiles.

Animal Welfare

TVWC is concerned from an animal welfare point of view when members of the public illegally keep wildlife. We recognize that animals, like us, not only deserve a life free of pain, discomfort, distress and hunger, but that they also deserve to have their physiological, psychological and social needs met.

Unfortunately, all too often, animal welfare is compromised when animals are kept by the public.

Take the example of a Blue-tongue Skink that recently came into care with a TVWC reptile carer. The caller's dog had attacked the lizard, causing severe injuries, where its teeth had pierced its head. The caller was concerned but, instead of calling TVWC or even just taking it to a vet, the person had kept it in their bath for a week, hoping it would get better. They called TVWC when the animal still refused to eat and had grown very weak.

Fortunately for the lizard, after a few weeks of care involving antibiotics and pain relief, the injection of fluids and appropriate housing in a thermostatically-controlled enclosure, it started to recover and has now been released near its original home site.

Often it is not the physical needs of the animals, but their psychological and social needs that are compromised. In another case, TVWC discovered someone illegally keeping a Ringtail possum in their aviary as a pet. The possum, apart from being fed an unnatural diet that was almost devoid of vegetation, was on its own and stressed. Ringtail possums are a very social species and live in communities. This gentle animal was destined to live its life in isolation from others of its kind, not to reproduce and contribute to the native population. Unfortunately, despite our efforts to persuade the person to hand over the animal so that we could reintroduce it to others of her kind already in care, and ultimately to release her back into the wild, the person refused. National Parks officers were forced to step in and prosecute the person, but by this time, the animal had been moved and is probably still living its solitary existence in captivity.



Ringtail possums are social species and need to be with others of their kind, not held as pets. These two Ringtails who came into care separately were paired up in care for this very reason, and were released together.

Calling TVWC too late!

These examples are not isolated cases. TVWC members usually get to know about illegally kept wildlife when the animal being held by the member of the public becomes sick or the person can't cope with it. For example, many animals, especially young ones, need hours of specialist care, including around the clock feeding, or feeding every hour or even half hour. The demands of the animal sometimes become too much, or the person has to return to work, or needs to go on holidays, or the animal becomes a problem because it has become too humanised, or it is not thriving ...

TVWC carers then have to try to solve the problems, or watch the animal die because we were not contacted in time. This is unfair on both the animal and on the volunteer carer left to try to rehabilitate an animal compromised because of someone else's actions, however well-meaning.

One wonders how many illegally reared animals are out there? Animals that may be now humanised, in poor condition, in the wrong environment, without companionship of others of their kind, or cooped up in a cage when they should be soaring or running free.

Our Responsibilities

All of us have a responsibility to do the right thing by our wildlife. If you find an injured native animal, put the animal in a box, lined with a towel, and keep it in a warm, dark and quiet place while you call TVWC. If you can assist TVWC volunteers by taking the animal to a carer or the vet, when asked by the phone volunteer, this would be appreciated. Otherwise, wait while a carer comes to collect the animal. This will ensure that it receives the treatment it deserves, is humanely euthanased if its injuries and pain are too great, and is cared for in a way that will allow it to live with others of its kind in the wild.

Remember also, wildlife is not ours to keep; every wild animal has the right to a life that fulfils their social, psychological and physical needs.