

Veterinary Practice

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Should practices accept more wildlife cases?

Working in a wildlife-friendly practice, Richard Edwards describes the benefits of treating a great range of species, from badgers to whales



JOHN PERIAM

John is a photojournalist; he worked as a veterinary salesman in the 1960s and still has strong links to the profession through his equestrian work. John is also a regional correspondent for a trade paper for the UK fishing industry.

Richard Edwards qualified in 1989 at Cambridge after fulfilling his childhood dream. "It was a bit of a struggle getting there – but in the end, I made it," he said with a smile. "From the start I wanted to be a practice owner so I could forge my own interests. In the early days I made a concerted effort to gain as much experience as possible in what was involved in running a practice by working for several small practices in Kent and Sussex."

Richard, together with Sandra Leatherdale (VN and wife-to-be) and fellow vet Katie Rook, came across a closed video shop in Bognor Regis in a small out of town shopping mall, along with another property in Birdham, near Chichester. After securing financial support from several

sources including family and locum work, both practices opened in September 1993. "It was also a learning curve in 'do it yourself' – we did everything from painting to building extensions and fitting out the surgeries. Passers-by were interested and little did we know at the time it was free advertising as there was a nice park next door where dog walkers came every day. We had a queue of new clients at our opening day event!"

Twenty-five years later as writer of this feature I am sitting with Richard in his practice office at AlphaPet Veterinary Hospital (it achieved accreditation as a Small Animal Veterinary Hospital from the RCVS in 2016). There are 13 vets in all at the three practices, plus a dedicated nursing, reception and admin team. The Birdham and Chichester surgeries are rural and have two vets working in each. They like to make sure there is regular continuity, so clients see the same vets each time. The practice also encourages new graduates in training, and several have returned to join the team.

"There is a current trend in the profession for corporate development of practices. We set this practice up from day one, and we want to retain it as our own – it's all about staff loyalty – their future and, most important of all, the way we want to run our practice. Since I qualified I have had an interest in wildlife, and it is something I want to encourage a lot more in the veterinary profession. Having my own practice has given me this wonderful opportunity to turn my interest into reality."

It all started with the RSPCA bringing two badgers to them in the 1990s and asking if they could do a post mortem to see what caused their deaths – it was an horrific baiting issue, which Richard still remembers to this day!

"After that I decided the practice would take in more wildlife cases. I was my own boss so there were no issues. I've proved that it does not use a lot of practice resources or funds. Yes, it will take up some of our time but the results are well worth it. I refer to a case where a fox had been rescued from a hunt and was brought to me one Saturday afternoon, when I was on duty. For some reason the media got hold of the story and we got the most amazing amount of publicity as a result. I try to steer away from personal publicity, but this really helped the practice and changed my views on foxhunting.

"We can see anything, from birds caught by cats, bats, feral cats, urban foxes, hedgehogs, deer right up to stranded seals and





A

(A) Hedgehogs are regular inpatients. Tamara Watson and Jaz Nicholls hold two recent casualties **(B)** The practice is on 24-hour call so wildlife cases are often on the list **(C)** Woody the stray cat recovering from a fractured pelvis with Aimee Dubben after 103 days as an inpatient



B



C

dolphins." Richard recalls a situation where a deer was taken to another rural practice. "They were not interested and contacted a local wildlife trust who, knowing us, brought it over – a journey of some 50 miles, all told. We did an X-ray and sadly it had a broken back so little could be done. Had the other practice shown more interest – time, money and, dare I say it, unnecessary stress for the animal would have been saved. There is still this perception by many that wildlife is somehow a different veterinary discipline. That's not really the case – most that we deal with are simply smaller versions of small animals that we see on a daily basis – and our assessments and treatments would run along the same lines."

Richard went on to say, "The practice works closely with the local Brent Lodge Wildlife Hospital, and we call to see them on a weekly basis. Reciprocal arrangements are made and they send us clinical cases which are charged at cost. They then take recuperating cases back so we are not overburdened with wildlife patients. We also have links to other wildlife organisations including the RSPCA, which often involves us with injured swans."

The practice is closely associated with the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR). "We have helped rescue stranded seals, porpoises, dolphins and even whales. A few years ago, I was involved with a northern bottlenose whale that had stranded on dangerous mud flats in Langstone



A

(A) Surgery can be performed at all times with the dedicated veterinary team on hand – this includes wildlife (B) Nicky Roots checks the important stock cupboard – wildlife casualties need on-going treatment also, which comes out of practice funding



B

Harbour in Hampshire. One of my most memorable personal achievements was that I was able to get a blood sample from its dorsal fin. The sample was whisked back to our surgery in Bognor Regis where it was run on our in-house blood machines. Sadly, it showed that the whale had renal failure and it had to be euthanised.

“The next day we had a tiny pipistrelle bat in for treatment weighing less than 7 grams! Such can be the diversity of patients for practices that decide to deal with wildlife.”

For Richard and his team at AlphaPet it is professionally rewarding to be able to look after wildlife, despite the fact that only around 35 percent of casualties are suitable to be returned to the wild. However, they will have prevented a



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huge amount of unnecessary suffering. As I found out today, there is something very special for a nurse to be able to treat a pair of baby hedgehogs that would not have survived if Richard had not taken them in. “Having them did not interfere with our daily routines and certainly did not cause us any financial issues.”

The practice is one of only two local independent practices continuing to offer a genuine 24/7 out of hours service as part of their Veterinary Hospital Accreditation. This of course means many referrals come their way, which include wildlife cases.

Richard truly believes that wildlife work pays for itself. He went on to say, “PR value alone for a profession that is all too often seen as being ‘only interested in money’ helps to show us more in our true light and the reasons why we really became vets and nurses in the first place – to treat animals, paying or not. Perhaps that is also the reason why, at one point, my wife and I had 18 cats and six dogs – all originally waifs and strays that did not deserve to be euthanised simply because they didn’t have owners who could pay for the treatments they needed.”

This was proven to me again on my visit when I met Woody, a stray cat, who had been run over. His pelvis was badly damaged but Richard felt it could heal naturally, given time. He was now on his 104th day there and able to walk and looking forward to a future he certainly would not have had before.

“What I would like to see are more practices taking on the added role of looking after wildlife. We have proved that it can be done and in the process, have gained the respect of our clients who like to be kept up to date regarding any unusual cases in our reception area. Along with our colleagues at AlphaPet we can wake up in the morning feeling we have given just that little bit more back to the veterinary profession. It is not a lot to ask. Why not consider opening the door that little bit wider to let these new-found friends in?” 