

Rescue

Injured animals are terrified and desperate to escape. Handle the animal as little as possible.

Protect yourself – your own safety is your first priority.

Possums do bite and scratch – cover the animal (in particular the head) with a towel, clothing, blanket etc before picking it up.

If it is a female look whether there is a pouch young. Even if the animal is dead, look whether there is a lactating mammary gland and elongated teat – in that case there was a baby in the pouch. Look for the 'lost' baby.

Place the animal in a secure, dark box of appropriate size and with ventilation holes.

Secure the box in your car – not in the boot if possible – and transport it to a vet hospital or carer as soon and as stress-free as possible.

Handling

Grasp it around the neck and shoulders and support its body weight with the other hand by hold-



ing it at the base of the tail.

Do NOT hold the tail and let the ringtail hang – this can cause serious tail pull injuries resulting in spinal cord damage.

First aid

Always keep in mind that wildlife is highly susceptible to stress-factors such as close proximity to predators (dogs, cats, humans...), confinement, noise, bright lights and handling. Stress, is a major killer for adults and babies!

Keep your ringtail:

Warm – dark – quiet – secure

Assessment and first aid

During the assessment try to keep the animal as comfortable as possible.

Does the animal have a heartbeat and does it breathe?

Does its breathing sound laboured?

Usually observation without handling

Is it bleeding from the nose or mouth?

Is there any blood or mucous in its mouth and affecting its respiratory system?

Are the front teeth broken?

Take it to a vet.

Is the animal moving normally?

Does it drag its hind legs over the floor?

Dog attacks can result in a fractured spine (or spinal cord damage) with no obvious outer injuries. However hind leg weakness can also be caused by disease, poisoning and many other causes.

Consult a vet.

Are there any visible injuries?

Puncture marks can be well hidden in thick fur. Matted fur areas can indicate a wound.

Check also for old injuries.

Bacterial infection should be considered whenever there is traumatic injury. Ringtails appear particularly susceptible to wound infections and septicaemia associated with cat bites. Appropriate antibiotics should be administered prophylactically to possums bitten by cats.

Wound treatment:

Clean wound with slightly salty water or 1:10 vinegar water. E.g. Derma-Clens cream removes dead tissue. Then cover the wound with a slight antibacterial bandage.

During the healing process honey can help protect the area from dehydration and scabbing and scarring is reduced.

Is the animal in shock?

All animals should be considered as potentially in shock and given a warm stress-free environment as First Aid.

Infection, blood loss and trauma, can all cause shock.

The body's response is:

Small arteries in the skin and gut narrow in order to direct blood to the heart and lungs and maintain the volume of the bloodstream (cool extremities).

The heartbeat quickens, organs are starved of oxygen, blood pressure drops, the blood flow to the kidneys is reduced with reduced urine production (animal does not urinate for hours), toxins from dying tissue are released and muscles weaken.

Signs we might notice include increased heartbeat, increased respiration, apathy and collapse, cold to the touch, pale mucous membranes.

Warmth, then fluids are the cornerstones of First Aid. Warm the animal up slowly before starting fluid therapy. By warming the body, blood is returned to the extremities.

Fluids need to have body temperature. Oral fluids should not be given to hardly conscious animals - risk of aspiration pneumonia.

Fluids need to rectify dehydration which will result in an expansion of the blood volume and support the heart and kidney function.

Toxins are flushed out.

Electrolytes will help regain muscle strength.

In addition, fluids need to be given for maintenance requirements and to replace ongoing loss of fluids (urine); however, fluids should be given in regular intervals - not all at once. After 24 hours ca 50% of the deficit should be replaced (plus maintenance requirements). Ringtails should be fully rehydrated after no more than 3 days. Then freshly squeezed orange juice or pieces of orange or mandarin can be offered but they are not sufficient as a re-hydration treatment for shock. They should be used afterwards to cover maintenance requirements.

Is the ringtail suffering from Hypothermia?

Signs include: cold when touched, unconscious (or barely conscious), hard to detect a heartbeat, trembling, pale mucous membranes.

If an animal is wet, dry it quickly but carefully - wrapped in a towel, then with a warm hair dryer. Otherwise warm it up slowly in a hospital box (or Brooder) or using a heat pad. Do NOT administer fluids while the animal is cold and barely conscious.

If the underlying cause is disease or injury or if the animal is too run-down to recover, the organs are probably shutting down and warming the animal up will only quicken its death. Simultaneous fluid therapy while warming up might be needed; in this case it can only be administered by a vet (drip).

Is the ringtail dehydrated?

Test: Pinch and lift the skin between the shoulder blades slightly and if it doesn't smooth down quickly, the animal is dehydrated.

Severe cases exhibit: eyes dull and sunken back in the head, dry mouth, whitish colour of gums,

'old cat look'.

Dehydrated ringtails will usually drink if they are conscious and feel safe - in a quiet, warm, dark environment.

Lectade (vet) or Gastrolyte (chemist) fluids can be offered (at body temperature) - always follow the instructions on the box. These contain a combination of electrolytes and energy sources such as glucose.

If you don't have access to an electrolyte solution, use one teaspoon of glucose or honey and half a teaspoon of salt to one cup (250 ml) of boiled and cooled water.

For weak adults or babies carefully drip fluids into their mouth with a syringe or eyedropper.

In cases of severe dehydration take the ringtail to a vet. They will put it on a drip or give fluids sub-cutaneously.

Is the animal suffering from Hyperthermia (Heat stress)?

Signs include: panting, seizures, collapse, trembling, bright red mucous membranes

Slowly cool the animal down, do NOT use cold water on it.

If you lower the temperature too quickly collapse might occur.

Does the animal suffer from neurological trauma?

Signs include: pupils of differing sizes, animal doesn't walk normally and tends to fall to one side, keeps its head tilted to one side.

Take it to a vet.

Are there any fractures?

Stabilise the fracture by placing a padded splint on arm, leg or tail and bandage as far as the joint above and joint below. Immobilisation of a fracture reduces the pain by 50%!

Ask a vet for an x-ray.

Is there an open wound in the skin with bone sticking out (compound fracture)?

Place a sterile dressing over the wound before splinting it. Compound fractures need urgent antibiotic treatment - take it to the vet as soon as possible.

Are there any burn wounds, blisters or swelling?

Burns are very painful. If an animal is in pain treatment by a vet is usually preferable to carer treatment - even if we are well capable of doing anything. Vets have access to strong pain relief medication.

Burn victims are dehydrated! Cool, very careful bathing of the wound to remove burnt debris is indicated.

Silvazine (Topical Anti-bacterial) cream is very effective in burns but must be prescribed by a vet. Apply sterile dressing (Melolin).

Are the eyes injured or look diseased?

Does one or both eyes look milky - old animals can develop cataracts just like us.

Young animals can also develop cataracts due to injury or disease

Do the eyes look bright and are free of discharge?

Do the pupils react to light?

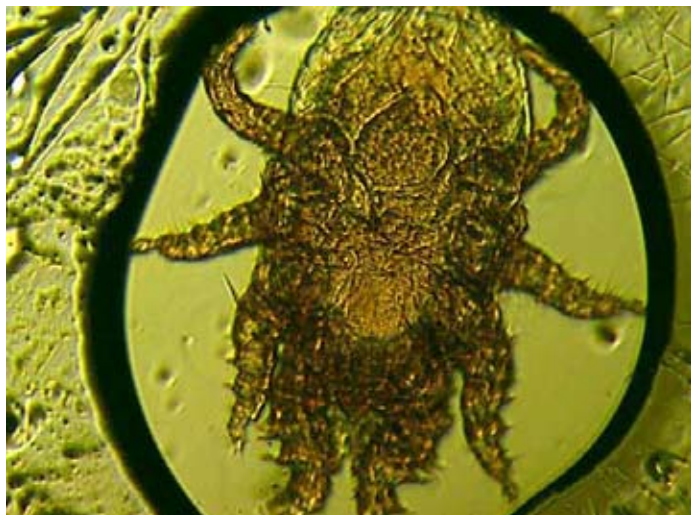
Remember: An animal in shock sometimes displays wide pupils in broad daylight!
Do NOT use a sudden (attack) movement in front of their eyes to check for blindness, it either scares them unnecessarily or they don't show any reaction despite not being blind.

Is the tail injured or floppy?
Cats and dogs cause severe injuries to ringtails' tails that often need tip amputation and long-term treatment.
See a vet for all wounds that are not clearly just superficial scratches.
However, tails can also be very floppy due to hypothermia and dehydration.

Significant tail injuries can be highly problematic for ringtails because of the tail's importance for climbing, balancing and nest building. Amputation of a significant part of the tail can render the ringtail unreleasable.

Are the paws injured or weak?
Check whether wounds are fairly superficial (abrasions) or whether the injury is deep (possibly ulcerated) and potentially infected.

Is the animal suffering from parasites?
Fleas, ticks and mites of numerous species can infest possums.
Maggots (fly-struck) mainly seem to strike when a possum is dying (particularly after trauma). They should be removed manually, then treat wounds topically and use systemic antibiotics. NEVER use commercial fly-strike products.



Most sick animals have increased numbers of parasites due to immunosuppression.



Low parasite numbers should be monitored, high numbers treated (e.g. Ivermectin).
Mites can cause severe irritation (itchiness) and bald spots.

Alopecia (hair loss, bald spots) can be caused by an attack, mites, stress, insufficient nutrition, hormones, too high (environmental) temperature or infection.
Always rule out infection.



If it is a female, is there a pouch baby?
Is the pouch looking healthy?
Check carefully without 'poking your finger' into the pouch.
If the pouch is dirty or contains pus, clean it very carefully or consult a vet.
Some orange/reddish fluids are normal pouch fluids – don't remove them. If in doubt ask a vet.
Signs for pouch infections include moist matted fur adjacent to the opening and greasy smelly liquid within the pouch. Antibiotics and antiseptic irrigation of the pouch are usually needed.

How much does the animal weigh?
Is the ringtail emaciated or in good condition?
Record weight so that you are able to notice potentially dangerous weight loss.

Whatever you find or don't find – write it down!
Records are vital for rehabilitation and for you to learn.

Role and limitations of care

We provide temporary care of sick, injured, diseased or orphaned wildlife until it is capable of fending for itself with the aim: "To give each animal the best chance of post-release survival in its natural place in the wild".

We provide care, not vet treatment – if an injury is severe or a condition threatening, seek expert

advice.

Long-term care is highly stressful for an animal and often results in the break-down of the immune system or in complications (new injuries).

It is the vet's decision whether an animal has to be euthanized.