

What is Imprinting?

Most mammals and birds recognize their own species through a process called imprinting. When an animal is very young and its eyes begin to focus, it looks at who is caring for it, nurturing, feeding and protecting it. From this individual it gets a mental picture of who he is. This picture (or imprint) stays with the animal its entire life and once formed, can not be changed.

Exactly when this happens depends on the species. Ducks and geese, for instance, imprint almost immediately, and it is reinforced the first couple weeks of its life. A Great Horned Owl's eyes begin to focus at about 2 weeks of age. Imprinting takes place shortly thereafter. Mammal's eyes open and focus at various stages of their development.

This imprint not only gives an animal its identity, it also serves to help it choose a mate later in life. This is why a Blue Bird doesn't attempt to mate with a Blue Jay, or a Crow with a Sea Gull. The wrong species doesn't match that imprint. You can say an animal is looking for a mate "JUST LIKE MOM."

Most of the time this works quite well: Geese raise geese, crows raise crows, and deer raise deer. But when a person hand raises a wild animal, that animal can grow up believing it is a person. It will seek out people when it wants company, is injured, scared and when it's time to mate.

It is a very miserable life for an animal that is imprinted on humans. It faces a life of frustration and rejection. (Just think what it would be like if you were physically incompatible with everyone you were attracted to.)

Even if the animal is past the age of imprinting and "learns" to accept humans, without others of its species with which to interact, it never learns the proper etiquette of behaving around other animals. An animal that doesn't use the proper body language and behavior will be rejected by other members of its own species.

Wildlife Rehabilitators deal with the problems of imprinting the animals under there care in numerous ways.

Using surrogates:

Wildlife rehabilitators often have a selection of non-releasable adult animals that can serve as foster parents for orphaned babies. The babies grow up with a natural parent, learning proper behavior and the skills they will need to survive.

Strength in numbers:

Because Wildlife rehabilitators receive large numbers of animals from the surrounding area, baby animals don't have to grow up alone. They are place with other babies of their species who are in the same situation. Together they grow and bond and learn to interact. Once old enough to be released, they are released together as a family unit.

A network of rehabilitators:

Wildlife Rehabilitators maintain a network of members. If a rehabilitator receives a single baby, it can be placed with another rehabilitator who has others of that species.

Your Rehabilitator