



Matthew Strickler
Secretary of Natural Resources

COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

Ryan J. Brown
Executive Director

April 14, 2020

Dear Wildlife Rehabilitation Permittee:

During this difficult time, our Department recognizes the important role that wildlife rehabilitators play in helping to protect the health of Virginia's wildlife. Likewise, DGIF continues its mission to conserve and protect Virginia's natural resources. During recent weeks, you may have heard concerns circulating in the wildlife conservation community regarding the potential for humans to transfer the virus responsible for COVID-19 to wildlife. Currently, the most pressing concern is potential transmission from humans to bats, which has been documented in other parts of the world, as well as possible spillback to humans if the virus becomes established in bat populations. Recent reports of a tiger in New York City that tested positive for the virus and was symptomatic for the disease illustrate the potential susceptibility of wildlife species to coronaviruses.

DGIF has been working diligently with bat conservation professionals and wildlife disease experts across the country to assess the potential risks and concerns noted above, as well as identify preventive guidance for anyone who works directly with bats and other wildlife species. The potential for reverse transmission of the virus from humans to bats and other wildlife must be taken seriously. To minimize these risks, DGIF biologists, along with biologists in many other wildlife management agencies, have suspended their activities involving close contact with bats (i.e. cave surveys and field research) until further notice. Because many of you are likely going to start getting calls from the public about bats as more people start spending additional time outside and pup season approaches, we are urging your compliance with several emergency permit condition changes.

Specifically, the following emergency Wildlife Rehabilitation Permit conditions are effective immediately and will remain in effect until further notice. If you routinely work with bats, please read them carefully.

1. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), consisting of (at minimum), disposable or reusable gloves than can be decontaminated and a mask (e.g., surgical or homemade cloth mask) or respirator (e.g., N95 mask) is required when handling live bats that may potentially be released back into the environment. Gloves can be decontaminated using an alcohol-based solution containing at least 70% alcohol, bleach solution, or EPA-registered disinfectant. Cloth masks can be washed with a detergent in hot water. If reusing filtering facepiece respirators (e.g., N95 masks), rotate their use so they are worn only once every 5 days and stored in breathable paper bags between uses. If you do not have access to adequate PPE, you should not handle live bats that may potentially be released.

2. The rehabilitation of all bats that are not classified as state or federally threatened or endangered is suspended until further notice. Threatened and endangered (T&E) bat species include little brown bats, tri-colored bats, northern long-eared bats, Rafinesque's big-eared bats, Indiana bats, gray bats, and Virginia big-eared bats. If you suspect that you have a T&E bat species in your possession, please contact Rick Reynolds at rick.reynolds@dgif.virginia.gov or 540-248-9386 for guidance regarding how to proceed.
3. No bats currently in captivity are to be released into the wild until further notice.

There is no change to rabies vaccination and biennial titer requirements for permitted wildlife rehabilitators to be eligible to work with bats.

For bats you currently have in possession, the following new Wildlife Rehabilitation Permit conditions are effective immediately and will remain in effect until further notice.

- No bats are to be released into the wild until further notice.
- PPE is required whenever handling live bats that will potentially be released back into the environment (see permit condition #1 above for additional details). If you do not have access to adequate PPE, then you should not handle any live bats that will ultimately be released.
- Immediately implement enhanced protection measures for bats currently in your care including more frequent disinfection of bat-related care items.
- Keep bats that will potentially be released back into the environment away from people unless they are wearing PPE (minimum of gloves and mask or ventilator). Minimize direct handling of bats as much as possible and limit the number of people providing care.
- Routinely decontaminate all surfaces touched by humans.
- Wash your hands often and thoroughly for at least 30 seconds using soap/water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Should you, anyone who has come in contact with bats under your care, or others in your facility/household be diagnosed or suspected of COVID-19 infection, notify the Department immediately. You will not be required to provide the name of the individual that tested positive for COVID-19 but DGIF will work with you to develop a plan for the bats currently at your facility.
- Please contact the Rick Reynolds at Rick.Reynolds@dgif.virginia.gov or 540-248-9386 if you have questions or concerns about bats currently in your possession.

If complying with best management practices in regards to working with bats, PPE should already be a critical component of your toolkit. In the middle of this global pandemic, PPE, especially masks and N95 ventilators, may be difficult to obtain. However, masks may be reused if treated and stored properly and gloves may be decontaminated between usages. For the purposes of reducing potential COVID-19 transmission from humans to bats, please adhere to the guidance provided below.

- Wash your hands often and thoroughly for at least 30 seconds using soap/water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Touch the mask/ventilator only when wearing clean gloves.
 - Wear disposable gloves or decontaminate gloves after use with alcohol-based sanitizer or bleach.
- If using a home-made cloth mask, always wear the mask in the same orientation (i.e., always have the same side facing outward).
 - Wash cloth masks with a detergent in hot water between uses.
- Use masks/ventilators on a rotating basis and allow at least five days to pass between uses.
 - Wear only one mask or ventilator each day.
 - Store the mask/ventilator in its own breathable paper bag.
 - Label each bag with the date of last usage.
 - A minimum of five days should pass between each mask/ventilator use.
- Consider wearing dedicated clothing or washable or disposable coveralls to minimize potential transfer of the virus from your clothing to the bats.

When you are contacted by members of the public about bats in apparent distress, we suggest that you follow the same approach that DGIF will use in those circumstances:

- Advise the public to avoid touching any bats for any reason if they are infected with COVID-19 or have been potentially exposed to the virus.
- People that are not known to be infected with or exposed to COVID-19 should only move bats if they can do so without coming into direct contact with the bat. As always, be sure to advise them that any contact with the saliva or brain or spinal cord tissue of the bat constitutes a potential rabies exposure and must be reported to their county health department.
- For possible orphans, suggest they try to get the pup off the ground and closer to the most likely location of a colony so the female has a chance to come and collect it. Let them know that very few pups are ever found away from the maternity roost and that the roost may simply not be readily apparent.
- For adults, if there is a visible, serious injury then they should seek euthanasia assistance from a local veterinarian, if possible. If there are no obvious injuries, the bat should be placed in a location away from people and potential predators and given a chance to safely rest and recover on its own.

Please discourage the public from bringing any non T&E bats to you. However, if you are presented with a non-T&E bat and immediate return to the wild is not a viable option, euthanasia is the most appropriate course of action. Euthanasia may be performed by any licensed veterinarian. Some local Animal Control Officers may also be willing to assist you in euthanizing a bat. You are also authorized, as a permitted wildlife rehabilitator, to euthanize the bat using a carbon dioxide euthanasia chamber.

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For other mammalian wildlife species, most notably mustelids (otter, mink, weasels, etc.) and felids (bobcats), please consider utilizing the PPE described above to reduce the chance of transmission from humans to potentially susceptible wildlife under your care. DGIF will notify you if infection is confirmed in any of these species and if permit conditions are changed as a result.

These are a few simple steps you can implement now as more guidance is being developed. Minimizing the potential transmission of the virus to susceptible mammals and the health of our native bats—already under siege from white-nose syndrome—depends on all of us to do our best to keep them safe during this pandemic. We realize that many of you may initially feel that this guidance seems to go against the very reasons you became wildlife rehabilitators but please consider that the health of bat populations across North America must be placed above the needs of any individual animal.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation during these challenging times. The Department greatly appreciates the important services you provide to the public and your role in helping manage wildlife for the benefit of all Virginia citizens. Please continue to keep yourself and your families' safe while exercising measures to protect humans and wildlife during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information on additional precautions DGIF is taking in regards to COVID-19 can be found at <https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/covid-19/>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "RJB", is positioned above the printed name of the Executive Director.

Ryan J. Brown
Executive Director