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# The National Wildlife Control Training Program

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**ABSTRACT:** Despite rapid growth, the wildlife damage management industry lacks meaningful training standards, licensing, and certification throughout most of the U.S. In general, state wildlife agencies do not have the necessary personnel, expertise, or funding to develop and manage training programs appropriate for wildlife control operators (WCOs). We developed the National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP) to provide the fundamental skills and knowledge required by WCOs. The NWCTP includes a manual, species supplement, face-to-face training programs, and an on-line training program. Content was certified by the National Wildlife Control Operators Association (NWCOA) and provides individuals the opportunity for certification through NWCOA. This article explains the development of the NWCTP, its content, and the opportunity it provides for state and federal agencies, private companies, and individuals to increase capacity in resolving human-wildlife conflicts.

**KEY WORDS:** human-wildlife conflicts, internet, wildlife control operator, wildlife control training, wildlife damage management

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## INTRODUCTION

The wildlife damage management industry has experienced considerable growth in the past decade. Meaningful training standards and requirements, however, are lacking throughout most of the U.S. (Brammer et al. 1994). In the few states that require wildlife control operators (WCOs) to undergo training, courses usually consist of little more than trapper education (Oleyar 2007). Knowledge of trapping is important but does not cover all of the challenges and issues that WCOs must address, especially in urban areas. In 2011, we conducted a survey of all 50 states to determine requirements for individuals to be permitted, certified, licensed, or perform as WCOs. Twenty-seven states required permits and 11 required state training. Thirteen required individuals to pass an exam and 3 required training by the National Wildlife Control Operators Association (NWCOA).

Although the lack of WCO training is unfortunate, it is understandable. Training materials on wildlife damage management typically focus on individual species and methods, and often they rely on dated techniques or fail to apply to the work of WCOs. In addition, state wildlife agencies lack the staff, expertise, and funds required to adapt available materials to create training programs that are appropriate for WCOs.

We used our combined 70-plus years of experience in the field of wildlife damage management to fill this need. We realized such a task was controversial and fraught with many technical and heuristic issues and questions including, "How basic should the information be?" and "How much detail is necessary to satisfy the needs of beginning, as well as experienced WCOs?" We intended the training to have broad appeal and be capable of being configured to the diversity of state wildlife regulations in the U.S.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE NWCTP

We designed the National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP) using the model of driver education.

Just as driver education does not create race car drivers, the NWCTP will not turn participants into experts in wildlife damage management. The goal was to teach the fundamentals in a manner that ensured basic competency. We determined that the ideal training program should: 1) avoid geographic restraints and be suitable for WCOs anywhere in the North America; 2) recognize the diversity of activities and complex challenges that WCOs must address; 3) provide essential and actionable information in a succinct fashion to help new WCOs avoid making a "big mistake" by performing management actions in a manner that cannot be justified (Schmidt 1994); 4) encourage feedback from stakeholders with the goal of improving the program; and 5) allow the training to be adaptable to agency and company needs.

The project progressed rapidly after the NWCOA asked S. Vantassel to assist in developing a 2-day training event in Michigan during September 2010. The event was based on elements from the books *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage* (Hygnstrom et al. 1994) and *Best Practices for Wildlife Control Operators* (Curtis et al. 2004). The efforts resulted in a series of 14 PowerPoint modules. The first 9 modules addressed the fundamentals of the wildlife damage management, including theory and principles, physical safety, diseases, inspection, equipment, animal handling, euthanasia, carcass disposal, business practices, ethics, and law. The remaining 5 modules addressed the biology and control of bats (primarily *Myotis lucifugus* and *Eptesicus fuscus*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), tree squirrels (primarily *Sciurus carolinensis*, *S. niger*, and *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*), and unprotected birds (primarily European starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, English sparrows *Passer domesticus*, and domestic pigeons *Columba livia*). We selected these species for their broad geographic distribution and the diversity of skills required to manage them.

The Michigan training event was highly successful, so we decided to convert content from the PowerPoint

modules into text for a book. In February, 2011, we published *NWCTP: Preliminary Draft*, which was open for public comment (Vantassel et al. 2011). It consisted of the 9 core modules and 1 species module (Tree Squirrels). Modules received critiques from reviewers prior to publication and the preliminary draft was available for a broader review of the entire curriculum.

In response to reviewer comments and our own reflection on the program, we determined that additional material was required to round out the curriculum. We added modules on trapping, exclusion, and toxicants, along with some minor modifications. We published the expanded basic training program in February 2012 as the *NWCTP: Core Principles and Information* (Vantassel et al. 2012). The book included 252 letter-sized pages and 17 modules organized into two parts. Part 1 included 12 core modules that we consider necessary for every WCO, regardless of location (i.e., Wildlife Damage Management Theory, Physical Safety, Wildlife Diseases, Site Inspection, Overview of Wildlife Control Methods, Exclusion, Toxicants, Trapping, Animal Handling, Euthanasia and Carcass Disposal, Business Practices, and Legal and Ethical Issues). Part 2 of the NWCTP applies the core principles to the management of 5 common wildlife species that conflict with humans, namely urban birds, bats, raccoons, skunks, and tree squirrels. These 5 were chosen because they are widespread species of common concern and the skills needed to manage these species easily transfer to the management of other wildlife conflicts. Each of the species modules covered life history, signs, management methods, disposition, and euthanasia of the animal.

## USE OF THE NWCTP

The NWCTP has received broad exposure, having been presented at NWCOA's annual meetings (2012-2014), and before the Structural Pest Management Association of Ontario (Canada) in February 2013. Delaware was the first state to formally adopt the NWCTP for training for its WCOs, in April 2013. In addition, we are seeking endorsement for the NWCTP by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. We have been encouraged by the positive comments from state officials, and we look forward to working with them.

A key advantage of the NWCTP is the variety of ways participants can access the training materials. Those unable to attend on-site training events can enroll online at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (<http://nebraska.maps.unl.edu/productcart/pc/viewcategories.asp?idCategory=709&pageStyle=H>) or at the Integrated Pest Management Courses in Purdue's Extended Campus Distance Learning Program (<https://www.distance.purdue.edu/training/pest/>). Individuals who prefer a self-study format may purchase a hardcopy of the book and take the test online at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Regardless of whether the training is by face-to-face, distance, or self-study, those who achieve a score of 80 or higher on a 100-question objective exam are eligible for individual certification by NWCOA.

Some agency staff may question the need for training requirements and certification, as the status quo seems to be working. Our response is multifaceted. First, consum-

ers need protection from unqualified WCOs. Although certification does not eliminate improper work, it does help reduce it. Second, government agencies protect what they regulate. Everyone in the industry should be aware of what happened in Connecticut, when a WCO drowned a raccoon in public view (Hadidian et al. 2002). While completely legal, the action lacked foresight, and the resulting public outrage caused restrictive legislation to be passed very quickly. Fortunately, the law did not destroy the industry in that state, but the incident illustrates how legislators can act quickly when public outrage is high. All WCOs should be proactive in seeking positive regulations rather than having to be on the defensive against restrictions on activities and methods. Wildlife agency officials may be concerned about the adaptability of the NWCTP to the needs and requirements of their respective states. Although the NWCTP is complete as written, it also is completely adaptable. We can incorporate state regulations both in the NWCTP book and the exam questions. States wanting to include additional species in the training program can use the book *NWCTP: Supplemental Species Information* (Vantassel et al. 2013), which is a companion volume that contains information on biology and management of 29 additional species, from armadillos to woodpeckers.

In 2013-2014, over 200 WCOs were training through the NWCTP and contracts have been developed with two companies to expand use of the training materials. The NWCTP was recognized by the NWCOA, when they presented the authors with "Educator of the Year" awards in 2012.

Additional information about the training program, volumes, and wildlife species can be found online at: <http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>. Print copies of the NWCTP: Core Principles and Information can be purchased for \$40.00 plus shipping and handling, and the NWCTP: Supplemental Species Information can be purchased for \$60.00 plus shipping costs. For information on ordering, discounts and specials, contact the School of Natural Resources, Nebraska Maps and More, SNR Map and Publication Store during regular business hours (8 AM to 5 PM Central Time) at 101 Hardin Hall, 3310 Holdrege Street, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska 68583-0961; phone: 402-472-3471; fax: 402-472-4608; website: <http://nebraskamaps.unl.edu>; email: [snrsales@unl.edu](mailto:snrsales@unl.edu).

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