

WildCare: A Mobile Application for Accessible
Wildlife Rehabilitation and Public Education

Honors Thesis

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By

Hayley Troyan

Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology

Dr. Tanya Dewey, Department of Biology

Dr. Becky Ruzicka, Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology

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Abstract

Wildlife rehabilitation is an important interface between conservation science and public engagement, yet members of the public often lack accessible, accurate guidance when encountering injured or orphaned animals. Each year, rehabilitation centers across North America admit thousands of animals, with the majority of cases linked to human activity such as vehicle collisions, domestic pet attacks, and unnecessary intervention driven by misinformation. Although websites, pamphlets, and hotlines are widely available, these resources are often fragmented, difficult to access in urgent situations, and limited in scope (Cox, 2021; Miller et al., 2023).

This thesis project proposes the development of *WildCare*, a mobile application designed to increase accessibility, reduce misinformation, and connect the public directly to wildlife rehabilitation centers. The app integrates features such as species identification guides, an emergency decision tree, and location-based center directories, while also providing educational resources on ethical and ecological considerations. By synthesizing scientific literature, professional ethical standards, and models from successful conservation apps, this project frames the app as both a technological innovation and a conservation tool. The expected benefits include reduced harm to wildlife, streamlined intake processes for rehabilitation centers, and improved public understanding of ecological systems. Ultimately, *WildCare* demonstrates how mobile-first design can strengthen community engagement and support wildlife conservation outcomes.

1. Introduction

Wildlife rehabilitation plays a critical role in conservation and education, but communities and members of the public often lack insight on the purpose of wildlife rehabilitation and the accurate advice that is needed when facing any injured or orphaned animals. Across the United States, more than 2,000 licensed wildlife rehabilitation centers provide care for injured, orphaned, and displaced wildlife, ranging from small non-profit organizations to county-funded centers. These centers admit hundreds of thousands of animals annually. Birds, including songbirds, waterfowl, raptors, and small mammals, such as raccoons, opossums, squirrels, and bats are the most common admissions (Hanson et al., 2021; Mullineaux & Pawson, 2024).

Table 1. Wildlife admissions across three rehabilitation centers in the United States. Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center in Wisconsin, Wildwoods Rehab in Minnesota and Greenwood Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Colorado. This comparison highlights both the scale of admissions across centers and the increasing demand for rehabilitation services.

Rehabilitation Center	Location	Year	Admissions	Species Count
Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center	Wisconsin	2023	2,088	133
Wildwoods Rehab	Minnesota	2022	945	109
Greenwood Wildlife Rehabilitation Center	Colorado	2024	4,300	N/A
Greenwood Wildlife Rehabilitation Center	Colorado	2025	5,153+	N/A

A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review (2024) found that, while published data on post-release outcomes remains limited, rehabilitated animals can contribute meaningfully to population recovery, disease monitoring, and public engagement. Despite this growing importance and recognition, humans and animals are still put at risk when it comes to possible dangers or disrupting wildlife that do not need assistance due to misinformation. Some of these common misconceptions include the assumption that fledgling birds are abandoned as they still have not developed all their feathers, but are learning to fly, which in turn brings about many unnecessary admissions as well as strains on the limited resources of many centers.

My objective is to address the importance of mobile applications when it comes to bridging the gaps across misconceptions of wildlife and keeping both humans and wildlife safe. This thesis combines a literature-based needs assessment with a reflective analysis of the design process for *WildCare*, a mobile application created to increase accessibility in wildlife rehabilitation and reduce misinformation. The written component frames the problem, documents the need for such a tool, and reflects on the personal and professional journey that inspired its creation.

2. Inspiration & Personal Motivation

My passion for animals and wildlife began throughout my childhood, nurtured by watching National Geographic and PBS programs that revealed the complexity of wildlife behavior and taking that knowledge into the outside world of my backyard. Rescue and rehabilitation fascinated me from an early age. This interest grew into a career path as I gained hands-on experience at multiple centers: Rocky Mountain Raptor Program, Anderson Humane, DuPage Wildlife Center, and Northern Colorado Wildlife Center.

Across these organizations, I observed a consistent challenge when it came to admissions. When answering calls or encountering individuals with good intentions for wildlife, I found that they typically lack accurate information. Many admissions were led by misinformation instead of genuine emergencies and injuries. For example, baby cottontail rabbits were often brought in with the thought of abandonment, not recognizing that the mother rabbits only visit sporadically to nurse their young. These experiences, combined with my academic focus on wildlife biology and ecological restoration, inspired me to design a tool that could provide immediate, science-based guidance to the public.

3. Identifying the Problem

Wildlife rehabilitation centers across the United States admit tens of thousands of animals each year, and most of these cases are directly linked to human activity (Cox, 2021; Miller et al., 2023). These numbers are not isolated; they reflect a national trend in which rehabilitation centers are consistently overwhelmed by high intake volumes that vary across locations and resources (Mullineaux & Pawson, 2024; Hanson et al., 2021). The burden is particularly severe during spring and summer, when fledgling birds and juvenile mammals are most frequently misidentified as orphaned. Comparable datasets provide valuable context for understanding wildlife admissions. A study published in the *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* analyzed submissions across multiple Canadian rehabilitation centers and presented a detailed table of admission numbers by species group and cause (Table 2). This dataset highlights the scale of wildlife intake (King et al., 2023).

Table 2 . Characteristics of wildlife submissions received by the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (CWHC), wildlife rehabilitation centers (WRCs), and the Fatal Light Awareness

Program (FLAP Canada). The table summarizes the scope and nature of wildlife cases documented across these three major reporting systems in Canada.

	CWHC (2009–19), No. (%)	WRCs (2015–19), No. (%)	FLAP Canada (2015–19), No. (%)
Vertebrate class			
Birds	12,089 (65.2)	96,648 (66.7)	14,486 (100)
Mammals	5,825 (31.4)	41,202 (28.4)	NA ^a
Reptiles	279 (1.5)	6,802 (4.7)	NA
Fish	250 (1.3)	0 (0)	NA
Amphibians	97 (0.5)	149 (0.10)	NA
Unknown or unrecorded	0 (0)	45 (0.03)	NA
Species status			
Species at risk ^b	1,009 (5.4)	2,064 (1.4)	59 (0.4)
Migratory birds ^b	3,588 (19.4)	51,538 (35.6)	10,154 (70.1)
Age category			
Immature	8,853 (47.8)	86,148 (59.5)	NA
Mature	6,691 (36.1)	46,639 (32.2)	NA
Unknown age	2,996 (16.2)	12,059 (8.3)	NA
Region ^c			
Pacific	356 (1.9)	38,747 (26.8)	NA
Prairies	5,112 (27.6)	22,747 (15.7)	NA
Ontario	3,884 (20.9)	71,323 (49.2)	14,486 (100)
Quebec	5,384 (29.0)	12,029 (8.3)	NA
Atlantic	3,477 (18.8)	NA	NA
Northern	327 (1.8)	NA	NA
Final disposition			
Released	NA	55,270 (38.2)	3,298 (22.7)
Died ^d	18,540 (100)	83,331 (57.6)	11,006 (76.0)
In care	NA	642 (0.4)	NA
Placed	NA	365 (0.3)	NA
Transferred	NA	3,495 (2.4)	182 (1.3)
Unknown	0 (0)	1743 (1.2)	0 (0)
Total	18,540 (100)	144,846 (100)	14,486 (100)

^a NA = not applicable.

^b According to classification outlined by the Species at Risk Act (2002) and Migratory Birds Convention Act (1994).

^c Regions are as follows: Pacific (British Columbia); Prairies (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba); Ontario; Quebec; Atlantic (Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Labrador); and Northern Canada (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut).

^d Died included euthanized and animals that died on their own. Animals that were killed and sent to CWHC ($n = 5,172$) or euthanized at WRCs ($n = 47,052$).

Human disturbance is the overwhelming driver of admissions across species groups and regions. Analyses of more than 21,000 patient records found that 97% of cases were linked to anthropogenic factors, with trauma, vehicle collisions, domestic pet attacks, and window strikes, accounting for 61% (Cox, 2021). Broader surveys of 140,000 cases identified over 200 distinct

causes, ranging from poisoning to habitat destruction. Large-scale analyses published in *Biological Conservation* reinforce these findings, showing trauma, orphaning, and disease as the leading categories of intake across taxonomic classes and geographic regions (Miller et al., 2023).

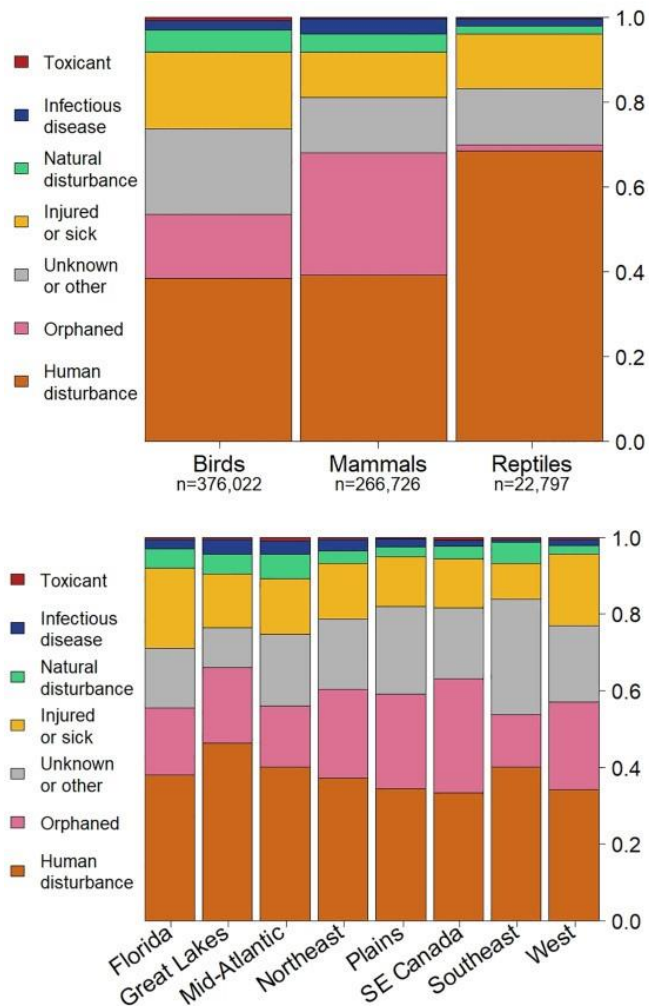


Figure 1. Reasons for wildlife admissions to rehabilitation centers, categorized by taxonomic class (A) and geographic region (B). Causes of admittance are grouped into seven umbrella categories. The figure illustrates how the relative importance of these causes varies across species groups and regions, highlighting the dominant role of human disturbance (Miller et al., 2023).

A significant portion of admissions stem from misinformation. Myths such as the belief that parent birds reject chicks touched by humans have been disproven by ornithological studies (Willette et al., 2023). Similarly, fledgling birds naturally spend time on the ground while learning to fly yet are often mistaken for abandoned nestlings. Well-intentioned interventions remove these animals unnecessarily, reducing their survival chances and diverting limited resources away from genuinely injured wildlife (Cox, 2021; Willette et al., 2023).

Unnecessary admissions place a heavy burden on rehabilitation centers, which operate with limited staff, funding, and facilities. Each intake requires medical supplies, housing space, and time that could otherwise be directed toward animals in true need. Beyond resource strain, unnecessary intervention disrupts ecological processes such as parental care and fledgling development, undermining conservation goals.

Together, these findings highlight the scale, causes, and consequences of wildlife admissions. They reinforce the need for accessible, science-based tools that can reduce misinformation and prevent unnecessary interventions. This rationale underpins the design of the *WildCare* app, which aims to provide real-time guidance to the public and alleviate pressure on rehabilitation centers.

4. Needs Assessment

Current outreach methods exist, including websites managed by wildlife centers, magazines and pamphlets, and hotlines that individuals can call regarding sick/injured animals. These methods have limited reach in part because they are not designed for use by mobile devices. Mobile applications, such as the one I am developing, demonstrate the potential for technology to

reduce misinformation and improve accessibility. A systematic review of 303 studies found mobile apps to be powerful tools for citizen science and public engagement (Hognogi et al. 2023).

Apps like iNaturalist have mobilized and promoted 100,000+ participants to record 3.3 million observations of 73,000+ species, generating data used in thousands of scientific studies (Mason et al., 2025). iNaturalist and other similar apps show the successes of mobile-first design for public education. Such examples convinced me that this mobile-first design could transform wildlife rehabilitation outreach and action.

Necessity regarding ethical frameworks and regulations also emphasizes the need for better accurate public guidance. The NWRA Code of Ethics requires wildlife rehabilitators to uphold high standards of care, abide by local laws, and seek veterinary support. The IWRC Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation encourage responsible practices across all species and regions (National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association, n.d.) By aligning these publicly used tools with a well established design, makes such regulation more accessible.

Currently there are apps ranging in focus on conservation and species identification, but none that focus on the specific aspects of wildlife rehabilitation. By combining aspects of education and personal assistance, this application can provide public understanding and important help wildlife rehabilitation centers that often lack support and funding.

5. Project Description: The WildCare App

By integrating species identification, urgent decision help, and direct connections to local centers, the app addresses both the ecological and ethical dimensions of wildlife encounters.

The mobile application *WildCare* was designed to address knowledge gaps through a mobile-first, user-friendly interface. Core functions include: Report Wildlife Sighting, Find Nearby Rehab Center, and Learn About Wildlife. Along with accessibility options such as language settings and text size adjustments, the design style emphasizes earth tones, clean typography, and nature-themed icons. Attached below is the full App Layout with descriptions and images of screens.

App Layout for WildCare

Thesis Project by Hayley Troyan Advisors: Dr. Tanya Dewey, Dr. Becky Ruzicka

Overview

This mobile app prototype is designed to increase public accessibility and engagement in wildlife rehabilitation. It provides immediate guidance for wildlife encounters, connects users with local rehabilitation centers, and offers educational resources to promote responsible action.

Published Link to App

<https://wild-care-04b14d12.base44.app>

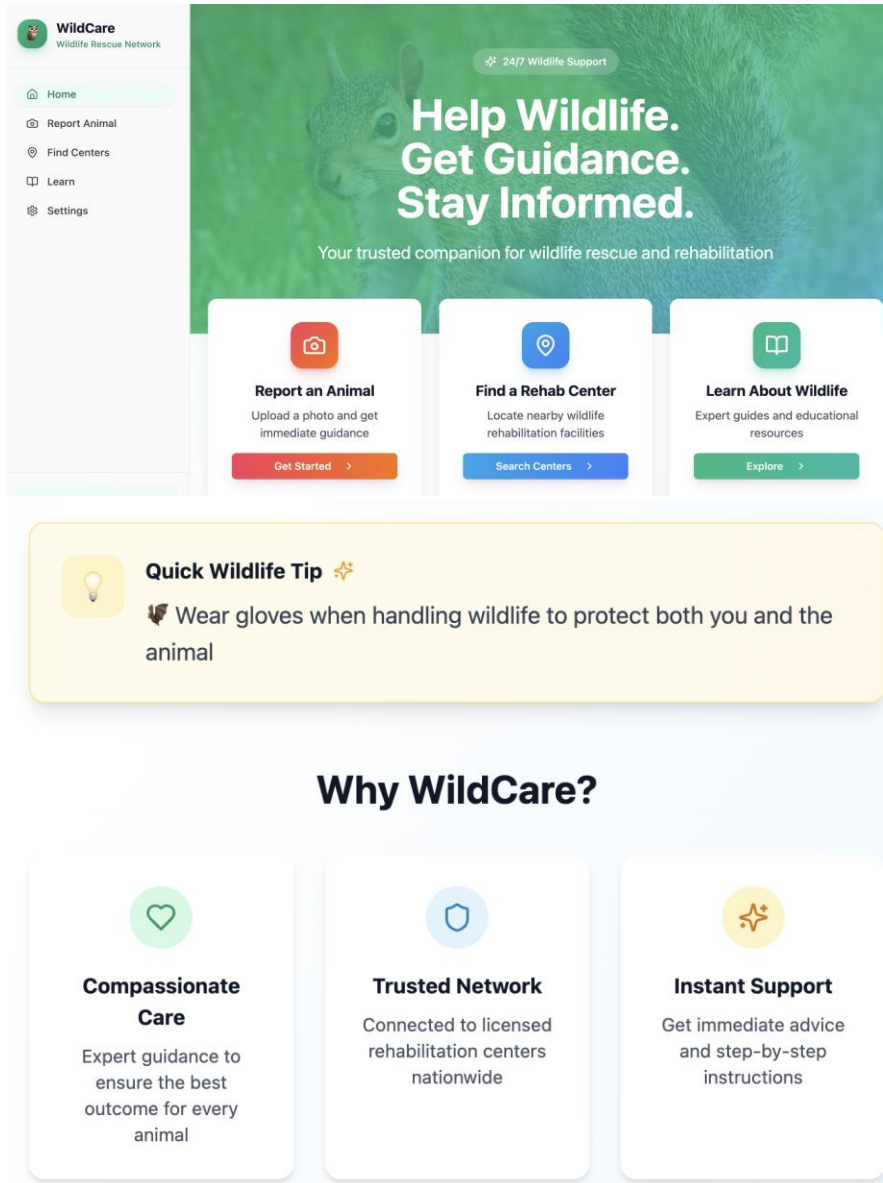
Core Screens & Features

Home Screen

A clean, intuitive interface with three primary actions:

- **Report Wildlife Sighting**
- **Find Nearby Rehab Center**
- **Learn About Wildlife**

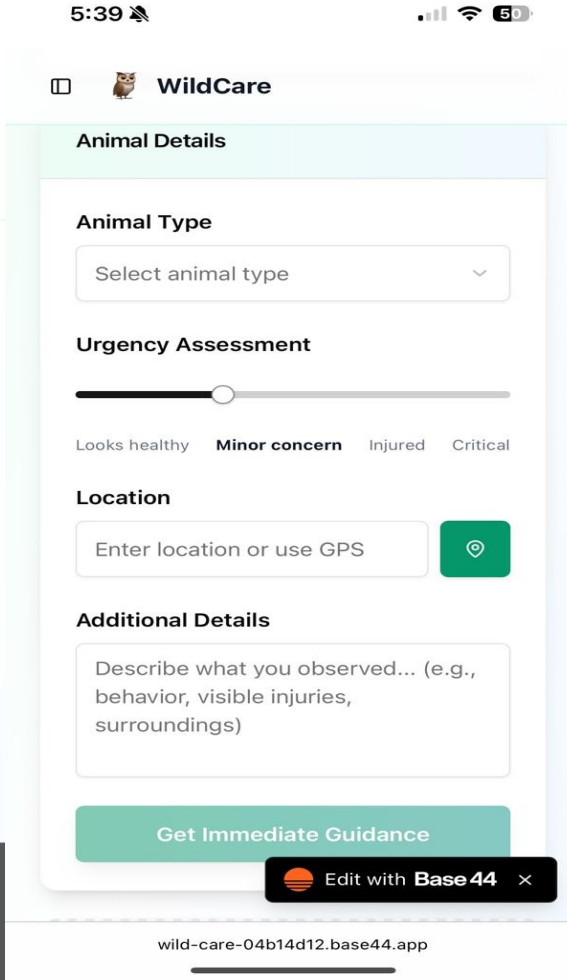
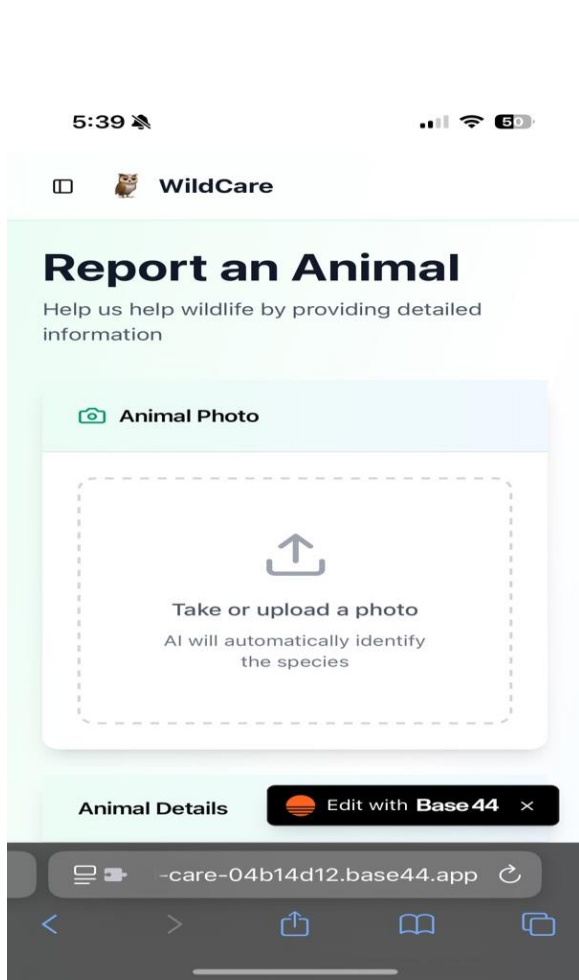
Includes a rotating banner with quick tips (e.g., “Don’t feed baby birds”).



Report Wildlife Sighting

Allows users to:

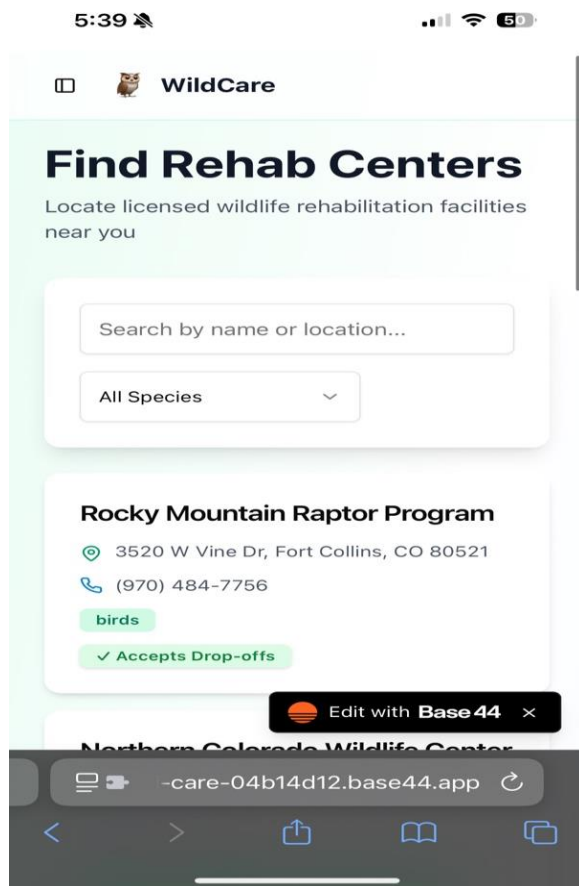
- Upload a photo of the animal
- Auto-detect or manually enter location
- Select animal type (e.g., bird, mammal, reptile)
- Rate urgency on a sliding scale
- Receive automated guidance based on input
- Connect directly to a nearby rehab center or hotline



Find Nearby Rehab Center

Provides:

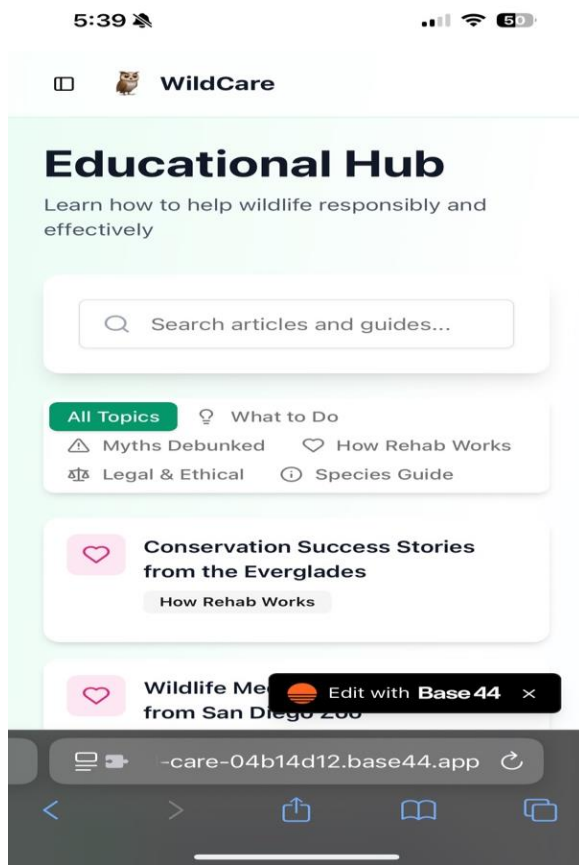
- List view with contact info, hours, and species handled
- Filters for open centers, drop-off availability, and species specialization
- Center profiles with directions, intake procedures, and FAQs



Learn About Wildlife

Offers educational content including:

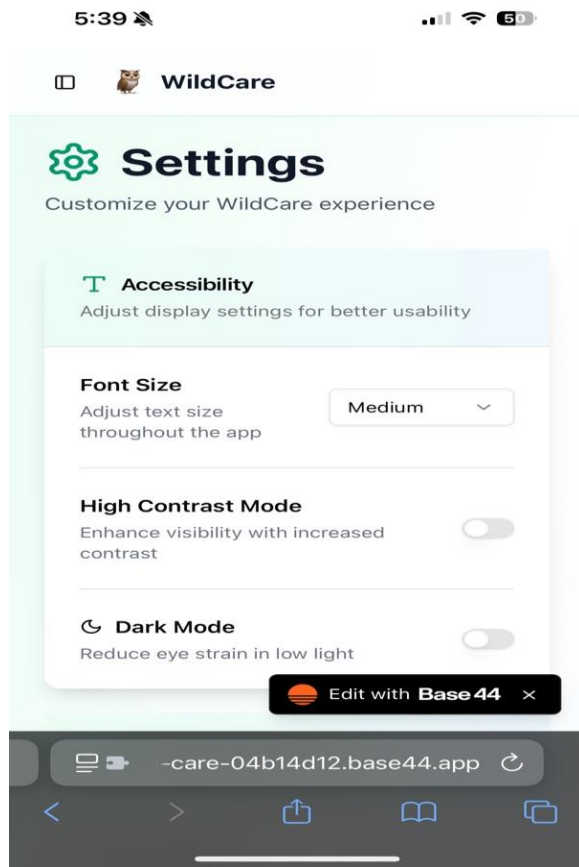
- Species-specific guides (“What to do when you find...”)
- Wildlife myths and facts
- Overview of rehabilitation processes
- Legal and ethical guidelines
- Interactive quizzes and downloadable resources



Accessibility & Settings

Ensures usability for all users:

- Language options
- Font size and high-contrast mode
- Offline access to basic guidance and center info
- Privacy and permissions settings



Design Style

- **Color Palette:** Earth tones (greens, browns, soft blues)
- **Typography:** Clean sans-serif fonts (e.g., Lato, Open Sans)
- **Icons:** Rounded, friendly, nature-themed visuals
- **Layout:** Mobile-first, responsive, and accessible

In summary, *WildCare* represents a practical, ethical, and innovative solution to the challenges of wildlife rehabilitation outreach. By combining science-based decision tools, species identification guides, and direct connections to local centers, the app reduces misinformation, improves accessibility, and strengthens community engagement.

6. Broader Context & Expected Benefits

Beyond wildlife biology, this project intersects with fields such as software design, environmental education, and nonprofit management. Its outcomes could benefit not only animals but also communities seeking to engage responsibly with local ecosystems. Through the creation of a centralized, mobile-first tool, the app can transform how groups interact with wildlife and conservation. Educators can use *WildCare* as a teaching resource, incorporating human impacts on wildlife and the use of real-world scenarios. Nonprofits and other organizations can use the app not only to engage communities but also donors and volunteers, using its design to address possible outcomes of wildlife encounters. Overall, *WildCare* becomes something more than a rehabilitation tool but also a platform for outreach and education.

Active rehabilitation centers stand to benefit in large amounts. Intake processes are often strained and difficult to coordinate, with unnecessary admission and miscommunication when it comes to healthy juveniles and other misconceptions. Guiding users through the next steps after finding an animal and submitting a photo or even providing direct contact to the local rehab center where they need to call, allows centers to focus on resources for the actual animals.

For the public, the app offers accessible, trustworthy guidance that builds ecological literacy. Users can gain confidence in their decision-making, learning to distinguish the difference between normal wildlife behavior and genuine emergencies, which is not often discussed. This empowerment and knowledge encourage individuals to see themselves as active participants in conservation rather than passive bystanders. Furthermore, individuals can eliminate the process of confusing search engines and navigating multiple websites and information that often varies. Over time, such engagement can shift cultural attitudes toward wildlife, promoting coexistence and respect for ecological systems.

From a conservation perspective, *WildCare* not only strengthens community engagement but also opens the pathway for citizen science. Many wildlife centers use their own programs in which much data has been accounted for; however, by encouraging users to report sightings and connect with local centers, the app generates valuable data that could inform regional wildlife monitoring and research than just from the wildlife center source. *WildCare* could contribute to datasets that track species distributions, seasonal patterns, and human-wildlife interactions. All of these outcomes extend the app's impact from individual encounters to broader ecological insights, reinforcing its role as both a practical tool and a conservation of innovation.

7. Reflection & Personal Growth

Throughout the development of *WildCare*, I learned the significance of connecting disciplines from ecological information/reasoning in combination with the design and communication of complex information. Furthermore, collaborating with advisors taught me the importance of adapting and pivoting when necessary, shifting from the aim of a prototype of an app to also a proposal and the why behind such development.

If I were to do this project again, I would focus on stakeholder engagement and feedback of this app/website from wildlife rehabilitation centers through the initial design phase, allowing for more perspectives of individuals who work in these areas every day, versus having experiences here and there. This process further reinforced my goal of wanting to work within wildlife rehabilitation while integrating accessibility and outreach, ideally possibilities within my own sanctuary/center one day. In many ways, this project reflects my lifelong passion for animals, my commitment to conservation, and my desire to make science meaningful beyond academic boundaries.

8. Conclusion

Wildlife rehabilitation faces constant challenges of misinformation and inaccessibility. Specific research and literature emphasize the point of needing clear, centralized, science-based resources, which also aligns with my personal experiences across multiple rehabilitation centers and the urgency of this issue. The foundation and application of *WildCare* addresses such gaps and setbacks through the use of a digital platform that integrates educational resources, directions, and connections with wildlife centers nearby, and most importantly, upholding ethical standards and safety for the individuals and the animals.

For me, this project represents not only academic achievement but also a step toward my long-term goal of making wildlife rehabilitation more inclusive, known, and impactful while contributing to conservation. By combining science, technology, and outreach, *WildCare* demonstrates how interdisciplinary approaches can strengthen conservation outcomes and empower communities to act responsibly in their encounters with wildlife.

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