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## **Earthworm Rescue**



**Eleanor White**  
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**Earthworms have four hearts. All of them have only the BEST intentions for our planet!**

As a wildlife lover, I've acquired, over the years, an alertness to wildlife suffering. I also will never forget the three horrifying two-week torture sessions of a conscious and aware (verified by [videos](#)) Terri Schiavo as the Pinellas County judge George Greer mandated three attempts to kill her by thirst, (the last one succeeding.)

During my working career, I never gave the little friends of the Earth, the earthworms, any thought at all. But now being retired, and more aware of animal suffering generally, I arrived at the point where I realized that these dear little creatures, who do only good things for our planet, suffer and die a terrible painful death by thirst when they get lost on a dry sidewalk.

So the question posed itself to me: "What do you do, when you come across a suffering animal? Do you turn your back, or try to help?"

## DO THE "LOWLY" CREATURES DESERVE OUR HELP?

To answer this, let me share an anecdote I heard at the funeral of a lady who had been a long-time member of my church:

Anecdotes from Isobel's life were related by family and friends.

One anecdote both saddened, but also uplifted me and I'm going to share it here.

Isobel came across a road where a colony of snails was making its way across, en masse. Naturally, there was carnage everywhere as this was a relatively busy road.

Isobel watched with interest as she noticed one snail, right at the road centreline, slowly circling another snail which had been crushed. (This alone shows that even "lowly" crawling creatures experience love as much as any higher animal does.)

Isobel moved the little one to the side of the road.

The snail immediately returned to the same companion or mate it had been circling, and continued to circle the mate in the middle of the road.

Isobel retrieved the dear creature to the side of the road SIX times, and every time, it returned to its mate. Before a seventh attempt was made, the little loyal creature was itself run over. The ultimate sacrifice.



I have spent my retirement observing and interacting with all manner of wildlife, and what this has taught me is that animals participate in life and have feelings \*exactly\* as we do.

A similar example of crows' caring and their family ties can be found in my essay on them, on pages 13 to 14:

<http://www.randomcollection.info/crowchron.pdf>

My interactions with earthworms in all sorts of settings has convinced me they are every bit as aware they are living, sentient beings as we are. And the snail story makes it virtually certain that more than just being aware, earthworms are capable of love too.

They deserve, in my opinion, all the compassion we give mammals in trouble.

By the way, one of the best ways to help is to take courses offered to those who seek to become licenced wildlife rehabbers, even if you don't plan to go that far yourself. Learning about wildlife is very interesting.

Locating and keeping contact information for your local licenced wildlife rehabbers is an excellent way to

prepare for helping wildlife in trouble. Having minimum orphaned animal transport gear with you when you drive or walk is another good idea, e.g. gloves and a sturdy laundry bag.

Anyway, after retirement, I began a personal program of rescuing earthworms. It is not the most pleasant activity in the world, however, I find that it is a fount of good feelings.

And although the body language of earthworms is limited, I like to think I see at least signs they are more comfortable after my rescue procedures.

So I am writing this article to share my rescue procedures with others who have a concern for animals, and thus may benefit from this type of activity. By the way, I've had compliments from members of the public for doing this.

## **WHEN TO RESCUE**

If I'm out walking, and it is actively raining to the point where the sidewalk surface is thoroughly wet, I don't feel obliged to rescue any earthworms, although I usually do stoop down and set them into adjacent grass or weeds. Over time, I find that 99.9 percent of earthworms who are out on a fully wet sidewalk manage to find their way off the pavement.

Once the rain stops and the sidewalk is just damp but not actually wet, I go to work.

## **TRIAGE**

Triage, choosing which earthworms to rescue is very sad. I choose to rescue earthworms who are moving, or who may not be moving but still are supple, not stiff. There is a sad grey area when earthworms are beginning to stiffen from drying out, but still have some obvious flexibility. Generally I give the benefit of the doubt and pick up earthworms who have some degree of drying out stiffness but are not completely stiff.

I rescue earthworms who are being attacked by ants. They may be dead, or soon to die, but I can't tell since the ants seem to paralyze their victims. I pick them up anyway, and brush off the ants, because if they are paralyzed, I want to get the ants off of them and get them to a shady spot where their last minutes or hours on the Earth can be as comfortable as possible. I bathe the ant victim worms with cool water, as there is a chance that even if they are paralyzed, cool water may reduce their suffering.

I also rescue caterpillars, garden slugs or snails, and occasionally beetles or grasshoppers who appear to be suffering, and who are far from shade on a hot sidewalk, or being attacked by ants, as they are in a similar situation to the stranded earthworm. These little friends I place on a rock in a shady place, in locations where predatory insect colonies aren't seen. In hot, dry weather, I give them a small puddle of water around where they are on the rock as well. They seem to relax when they feel the cool rock underneath them.

## **PICKING EARTHWORMS UP**

Picking up earthworms without hurting them can be tricky, especially if they are small, and/or skinny. For this purpose, I carry a small soup spoon. I place the spoon's edge against the ground, almost vertically, and gently pull the worm sideways and up on to the concave side of the spoon. This avoids injury.

(For rescuing garden slugs, this method also reduces the amount of gooey stuff slugs emit when picked up getting on your hands.)

## REHYDRATION

Earthworms and slugs out on the pavement in dry conditions, virtually always except during actual rain, are experiencing dehydration. Even if they aren't too badly dehydrated yet, they will be very very soon, as their bodies don't hold much water.

Along with dehydration, earthworms often pick up a coating of sand which will prevent them from breathing and being easily rehydrated. An earthworm with the usual glued-on coating of sand is in serious trouble.

Rehydration is an immediate need. For small worms and slugs, I may place them in the palm of one hand, and pour a small puddle of water from the half liter drinking water bottle I carry at all times. I also drink from the bottle, and I use it to top up a couple of small water cups I have set up for smaller birds to find water during dry weather, at my church.

To make the originally chlorinated water as friendly to birds and earthworms, I FILL MY WATER BOTTLE FROM A JUG WITH WATER OPEN TO THE AIR FOR 24 HOURS+. I started doing this extra step when a friend reported that birds in her back yard always avoided the bird bath when she put fresh water in it for 24+ hours. Obviously, the chlorine in the water IS sensed by the little folks, and it is a very small inconvenience to accommodate their needs for good quality water. And the worms, with their highly permeable skin, are surely as sensitive to chlorine as are the birds.

Many earthworms have been dehydrated for some hours, and are sluggish, obviously suffering the effects. It is awkward to walk and keep your palm level so a rehydration puddle stays put. Furthermore, for medium to large earthworms, your palm isn't well suited to rehydrating them.

In that case, I use a 2-1/2 inch diameter clear plastic container with a screw-on lid, illustrated at the top of this article. This container can hold several worms and a generous amount of water, and with the lid on, leakage is minimal and it can be carried easily as you walk. There is no need to worry about oxygen - sluggish worms use very little and they are never in the rehydration tank for more than 10-15 minutes. Worms absorb oxygen through their skin, and they can survive immersion in water for short periods. Unless deep immersion to break the hold of heavy mucous and sand is needed, I tend to keep the rehydration tank shallow, and this gives the worms some exposure to air, for oxygen, as I carry them to a release point.

When it's a long walk to a favourable worm release location, and there are multiple worms with heavy coatings of sand to dissolve off, I may change the water once or twice.

**CAUTION:** Do not leave worms in tank for extended periods. That is why a CLEAR plastic tank is essential, to avoid forgetting them.

Obviously, worms rescued from puddles don't need rehydration. I do try to place them in a shady area favourable to their best health for release.

If an earthworm is obviously peppy and moist, I keep them in the water just long enough to dissolve the sand coating off. That takes from 1 minute to as long as 5 or 6 minutes, during which time I'm continuing my walk to my destination. When the mucous and sand coating is heavy, and after a couple of minutes of soaking, I try to very gently massage the loosened but still adhering pieces away from the worm's body. That way, when the worm is released, the old coating sections can't re-adhere.

\*\* If you are interested in drought-condition helping of other small wildlife, see an idea for no-tip mini-cups for hiding water in wildlife-frequented areas, toward the end of this article. I have seen garden slugs crawling up the side of these cups, and dipping in for a drink in dry weather!

## WORM RELEASE LOCATIONS

Because adequate hydration is extremely important for tiny creatures who can only carry a limited supply of internal water, I put effort into finding places where a rescued worm will have the best chance of survival, or if in the process of dying, at least being comfortable.

In my current location, the lawns are generally terrible for earthworm survival. They are gravelly and bony (lots of rocks), have very little humus (organic material) content, and dry out almost immediately after the rain stops. Even if a worm is found in front of such a lawn, I will carry it to a better location. Simply placing it on a dried out gravelly lawn is just a longer death by thirst.

So I look for areas that have at least some humus, are shaded, and ideally in an area known for more than average moisture. Depressions along property lines, with shade trees are good candidates.

Then I try to find a shady spot to release the worm, and if the worm is very dehydrated, I may dig a slot in the soil with a spoon I carry, gently lay them in the slot, and fill the slot with water. The water doesn't remain long enough to drown them, but does give the dehydrated worm a wet environment, and makes some of the nutrients in dry soil available for osmosis through the worm's skin.

I try to find dark brown soil which is not too tightly packed, and which is at least somewhat moist. Importantly, I am always watchful for ant and other insect colonies, and I try to release the worm as far from insect colonies as I can - insects prey on earthworms (or caterpillars or slugs.)

Soil near a fence or foundation may provide shade and be a little looser than where the soil is walked on. Soil with long grass, and this is often grass in locations not mowed, is often looser than lawn soil. I pull the grass aside, (and this can take a bit of strong pulling at times,) and expose an area of bare soil a few inches on a side. I gently lay the worm or worms on the bare soil, carefully laying them out more or less straight so they don't adhere to themselves, which is important in hot dry weather.

I make sure, if I'm carrying multiple worms, that each worm is laid out some distance from the others, so they don't adhere to one another.

If there is nothing but dry topsoil available, I will pour some water over the worms and soil in the immediate vicinity to give them just a little extra rehydration therapy.

In DROUGHT conditions, I release the worms in the reliably-moist soil adjacent to creeks or lakes, but high enough on the slope that the release area doesn't get flooded or washed away. Water seepage up the slope usually provides such a safety zone.

I then gently close the grass over them - sun and wind can rapidly dry these little folks out too much. If there are leaves available, I may add leaves for cover as well. But I leave plenty of breathing space above the worms - I don't push the covering vegetation down on them.

Rescued worms tend to be weakened, and they should not be buried in soil.

I don't know if evergreens make the soil unfriendly to earthworms, but I've noticed over my lifetime that earthworms aren't found near stands of evergreen, so I avoid placing rescued worms near evergreens.

Because suitable locations are widely spaced along my walking routes, the time it takes to reach them is put to good use because it gives the worm(s) in the rehydration tank a chance to absorb more water.

## **EARTHWORM RESCUE SEASON**

Although I live in relatively cool Ontario, Canada, my earthworm rescue season has sometimes extended as early as late March, and as late as early December. I find that these northern earthworms can be just as peppy and flip around as quickly as a small warm blooded animal can. (I don't remember earthworms in more southern locations moving so quickly.)

I find that they try to jump out of my hand at first, but when they feel that puddle of (blessed) water, they relax and take full advantage of the welcome relief from thirst! They do seem to recognize that they are suddenly better off than they were a minute ago.

## **THE EARLY WINTER - EARLY SPRING PROBLEM**

It sometimes happens that a stretch of unusually warm or rainy weather, followed by very cold sub-freezing weather, happens either in early winter or early spring. This can coax a few unfortunate worms to come to the surface, where they are certain to be killed by the cold conditions.

This is hard on the conscience of an earthworm rescuer, because there is no place worms can be put in those conditions and survive.

I started during winter 2012-13 to provide in-home shelter for earthworms caught out in conditions too cold to survive. I've discovered that doing this requires very careful preparation if your earthworm guests are to survive the winter in good health. NOT expensive, not difficult, just a number of points to remember to take care of. Providing a good winter home for the worms is mainly a matter of remembering to carefully prepare, and to monitor their temporary quarters.

My solution was to have a supply of topsoil, which can be natural. Better yet partly sod (grass with some soil attached.) Another possibility is a commercial worm "farm" available from fishing supply stores. (Such a "farm" may be difficult to handle when attempting to release the worms in the Spring, however.)

The Frabill brand of worm "farm" material is well-shredded, virtually pulped, BLACK AND WHITE newsprint. Black and white has been said to have less chemicals.

If you keep a supply of natural topsoil ready for winter use, I recommend BAKING the soil for perhaps 12 hours, in an oven set for 275 to 300 degrees F. This is to kill any insect eggs which may be in the soil. I had a great many little soil gnats to deal with one year, and I had no way to get rid of them until I could release the worms outdoors.

**IMPORTANT:** Preparing to provide a refuge container for the winter of 2014-15, I tried one brand of potting soil. The first rescued worm REFUSED TO BURROW INTO THE POTTING SOIL. Potting soil does contain various fertilizers, and this experience made it plain to me that only natural soil with no added chemicals should be used as a winter refuge for rescued worms.

My 2014-15 winter worm home is a semi-clear plastic tub, 12" long, 8" wide, 10" deep. That 10" depth is very important, due to past experience with worms climbing out as Spring approaches and the worms get active. There is a photo of this tub on the following page.

I would estimate this tub should accommodate perhaps 25 worms comfortably. I've been averaging around 10 to 15 "guests" each winter.

See photo on following page.

thermometer to avoid freezing



SIZE:  
8" wide  
12" long  
10" high

natural soil top

well shredded  
newsprint bottom

Regulating the moisture content of the temporary home soil will require times with the lid removed, so the problem of worms climbing out needs to be addressed. The deep tub shown in the photo discourages worms from climbing out.

The reason the temporary tub must be clear (or semi-clear) is to visually monitor the moisture of the soil below the surface. If liquid water is visible at the bottom, temporarily reduce the soil watering to extra light, but not zero. Leave the tub top off while you are carefully evaporating any excess water content.

I first tried, without thinking this through, dry soil in the plastic tub. When I placed the first worm on the soil, he nearly suffocated because the powdery stuff coated him as badly as sidewalk sand does!

I bathed the unfortunate worm, placed him temporarily in another container, then drenched the soil, and patted it down into a compressed, moist state. I then loosened the soil. This, obviously, must be done **BEFORE** the first worm guest is placed on the soil surface.

A modest amount of commercial worm food should be sprinkled on top of the soil in the tub. I find some of the worm food disappears daily. For half a dozen worm guests, I find three or four pinches of worm food, sprinkled over the soil surface every one or two days, is plenty. As temperature increases in Spring, prior to release, I have had to double the daily food allotment. Food consumption from the soil surface is easily visible, as the commercial worm food is light tan in colour.

**IMPORTANT:** Mold can be problematic in a container with natural soil which is constantly moist. I keep the plastic tub in a cool part of my apartment, to avoid mold.

If the tub is kept in a cold room, not below freezing, the potential for a mold problem is minimized. This is important because changing to a new tub, with new soil, without injuring your worm guests, will be very difficult and will require the gentlest possible sifting through the old soil. Might even be impossible.

In a very cold room near freezing, I urge you to place a thermometer next to the tub.

If you experience an extended power outage, remember to bring the temporary worm home to a warmer place during the outage.

I apply water by dribbling it sparingly from a plastic drinking water bottle with a nozzle. I make one oval dribble ring, and depend on the water soaking sideways to get to all points in the container. This works well.

I avoid using a spritzer. I used one for a while, but I found that it kept the surface soil too moist, and encouraged mold. Dribbling water on the soil tends to cause most of the water to penetrate the deeper parts, leaving the surface drier than with a spritzer. To remove mold spots, take a spoon and take the mold and a little soil near the mold and discard.

I've found that maintaining a reasonable humidity in the worm refuge tub can be done by keeping the lid half covering the opening in the winter, and as Spring approaches, the refuge needs less covering to maintain a reasonable humidity.

When the outdoor weather warms up in April and May, before releasing the worms outside, I find I needed to cut back to just a very light dribble per day, due to increased environmental temperature and humidity.

You can feel the moisture state of the soil with your fingertips. **GENTLY AGITATE THE TOP OF THE SOIL FROM TIME TO TIME TO KEEP THE SOIL BED AERATED.** A spoon works well for this.

Monitor the sides of the plastic tub for excess water accumulation at the bottom. There should be little liquid water at the bottom, though a small amount is OK.

I recommend watering with the inexpensive **DISTILLED** water you can get from drug stores. That's because municipal water carries many chemicals, even after the chlorine has evaporated. Rain water or clean creek water would be OK alternatives. Pond water is questionable, with the potential for hostile biological things and/or pollution. (Commercial worm farm instructions recommend distilled water.)

If you can't get distilled or rain or clean creek water, at least set municipal water in a wide open container for a couple of days before using it, to evaporate the chlorine.

I accidentally over-dried my worm home's soil by putting in the sun. Even though I sprayed the top of the tub generously, the soil below the surface eventually became too dry. That experience taught me to not put the winter worm home in direct strong sunlight. Thankfully, I caught this overly-dry condition quickly enough that it appeared the worms survived.

Once you have your temporary home tub set up, use your portable hydration tank to bring rescued worms home from where you find them. If the trip home takes a lot of time, a bit of moist topsoil in the tank would probably be most comfortable for the worm in transit. A very small amount of water should be in the tank if no soil is available, to keep the worm from sticking to the plastic. Open the tank's



top now and then, to keep the worm oxygenated if travelling some distance.

Once outdoor conditions are fully safe for earthworms in late Spring, take the tub of soil, with the worms, and gently place the soil in a worm-friendly (grassy, shady, moist) location. Gently loosen the temporary home soil with your fingers, taking care to not injure the worms. Cover the released soil with grass and leaves, to keep it moist for a while, and so birds don't see the worms as they seek new homes.

Covering the released soil with sticks, to keep leaves and grass cover from being blown away is a good idea.

I live in central Canada, and I find that waiting until June 1st protects against releasing worms into suddenly freezing weather. I believe it's better to be too late than too early.

This sounds like a lot of effort, but in return, you get a clear conscience, and feel really good about your efforts!

Is all this effort worth the hassle? Absolutely! The feeling of helping suffering wildlife is wonderful! (And believe it or not, there are Internet blogs by others who share this unusual hobby!)

**"I have communicated with worms before. They "broadcast" a very warm, loving, communal and family feeling."**

-- Professional animal communicator

**[I have communicated with them,] and they are grateful when someone takes them off hot cement and puts them back on the grass. I am one of those who always places them back on a shady lawn.**

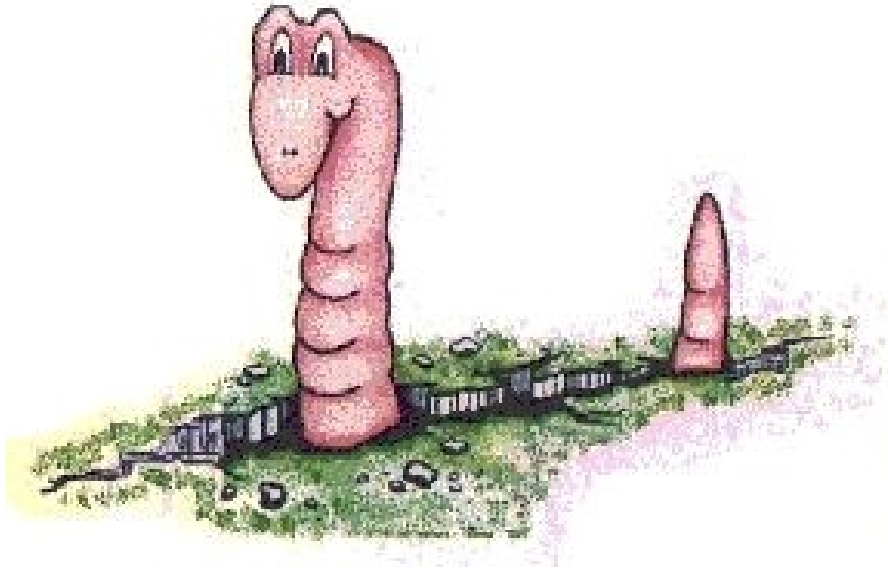
-- Professional animal communicator

**"We very much appreciate the respect you give us. We are surprised that someone is so kind and loving."**

**"When we are trapped in a place of certain death, we expect to be abandoned or trampled upon. That does not happen with [those who rescue us.] We are in awe, with such gratitude."**

**"We hope your efforts for us will spread so others of your kind will also respect us."**

-- Professional animal communicator communicating with an earthworm colony



## Other Wildlife Articles

<http://www.randomcollection.info/sqfriends.pdf>

<http://www.randomcollection.info/crowchron.pdf>

<http://www.randomcollection.info/snail-story.pdf>

<http://www.randomcollection.info/geese.pdf>



**Consider helping wildlife survive by using the image on the FOLLOWING PAGE as a flyer or poster. This is a PDF file, so you can print just the one page with the poster by selecting the page number in your printer's menu.**

# REMEMBER ...

**AS YOU DRINK THAT WATER, OUR BEAUTIFUL WILDLIFE COMPANIONS NEED IT TOO! AND IN CITIES, IT IS VERY HARD FOR THEM TO FIND!**



**WEATHER HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY DRY SINCE THE LATE 1990s. **\*\*DEW\*\*** HAS ALMOST DISAPPEARED. PLEASE CONSIDER SETTING OUT WATER DISHES TO PREVENT THE SUFFERING AND DEATH OF OUR BEAUTIFUL WILDLIFE.**

**PLEASE CONSIDER DOING THIS IN COOL BUT DRY WEATHER AS WELL ... WINTER CAN BE MERCILESSLY DRY, AND THERE ARE NO LAWN SPRINKLERS! WILDLIFE WILL EAT ICE GLADLY!**

**THEY WILL APPRECIATE IT!**