

censored

SMACC **SPOTLIGHT** REPORT

Spot the Scam:
Unmasking Fake Animal
Rescues

OCTOBER
2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

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Some “rescue” content in fact shows staged situations in which animals are intentionally put in danger, specifically so that the content creators can film themselves behaving “heroically” rescuing the animals.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the videos of cute animals on social media, you'll find those showing animals in need of rescue and care. Such content may show a heroic human rushing in to rescue a defenseless animal from danger. You may see other social media users commenting and praising the actions of the people involved. Some of these scenarios are genuine and showcase the incredible and vital work of animal protection organizations and individuals around the world. Most of us enjoy a happy ending, particularly when animals are in need.

But disturbingly, some of these are not real at all. Some “rescue” content in fact shows staged situations in which animals are intentionally put in danger, specifically so that the content creators can film themselves behaving “heroically” rescuing the animals.

For Fake Rescue content, animals are unnecessarily harmed, stressed, or exposed to risks. These videos can look realistic, but unfortunately the animals involved are being exploited and harmed, and are suffering for the sake of social media content. The content is presented to the viewer as a genuine rescue of an animal in need. Various tactics and misleading signals are employed to make the content appear realistic to the viewer. Fake Rescue themes vary widely, from animals in situations of immense danger, to the rescue of abandoned animals, to being buried or trapped, to animal attacks and fights, to animals in need of medical attention.

Creators of Fake Rescue content are not genuine animal rescuers or organizations, but are individuals seeking engagement on their social media, and sometimes seeking to profit from donations and monetization of their content through advertising.



A mother cat and kittens laying in a “dump”. The video describes the mother as “dying” before she is “rescued” by the content creator. She is unable to move her body until she is injected with an unknown drug by an unofficial-looking “vet”. This channel had multiple similar videos with different cats and kittens. SMACC ID: recUE5hYhSKVOQmuX

In this report, the Asia for Animals' (AfA) Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition (SMACC), explores Fake Rescue content, the forms it takes, the animals it targets and the platforms on which it appears. Crucially, the report also outlines what is being done to combat Fake Rescue content and how you can help.

After widespread media coverage about Fake Rescue content in recent years, some social media companies have implemented policies to prevent this type of content from appearing on their platforms. However, as we have identified in this report, these methods appear to be insufficient to capture the ever growing variety of Fake Rescue content that exists on social media. Content creators continually find new ways to exploit animal rescue narrative. Social media platforms, alongside all of us, need to be aware of this in order to keep up with creators and make sure Fake Rescue content is not finding its way onto their platforms.

Identifying Fake Rescues can be tricky as such content is constantly evolving and becoming ever-more realistic. However, there are clues or indicators that we can watch for to help determine whether or not content is genuine.

“ This report provides some key and common indicators of Fake Rescues that can help the public, social media companies and others to confidently identify Fake Rescue content and take appropriate action.

Another crucial aim of tackling Fake Rescue content is the need to protect genuine animal rescue organizations. Real rescuers have a right and a need to share the stories of the animals they help, to raise awareness on important animal protection issues, and to garner support for their work. The public needs to know how to distinguish between what is real and what is fake, to make sure they are supporting genuine work to help animals in need. Social media platforms also need to make this distinction, to ensure they allow the work of mission-led organizations and real animal advocates to flourish, whilst barring those who use animals as props for personal gain.

Over a three-month period, SMACC identified 605 links to social media content showing different forms of Fake Rescue. Cats, primates and dogs were the animals most commonly featured. **These 605 posts alone have been viewed over five hundred million times.**

The majority of Fake Rescue content was found on Facebook, followed by TikTok and YouTube. These posts represent a small fraction of the Fake Rescue content that is available online, showing just how engaging this content can be, and how damaging it can be for the protection of animals.

WHO WE ARE

The AfA Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition (SMACC) aims to shine a light on the hidden world of online animal cruelty in all its forms, and to lead the way in ending it.

SMACC seeks to collaborate with social media platforms to end the availability, spread and profitability of cruelty content, and to ensure that there are no benefits to the creation or promotion of cruelty content.

SMACC is a collaboration between a growing number of animal protection organizations, based around the globe:

Action for Primates, Animal Concerns Research and Education Society, Animal Defenders International, Animals Asia Foundation, Born Free Foundation, Born Free USA, the Civet Project, Europäischer Tier-und Naturschutz e.V, Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations, Freedom for Animals, Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust, Humane Society International, International Animal Rescue, International Primate Protection League, IUCN Section on Small Apes, Korean Animal Rights Advocates, Lady Freethinker, North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance, Pan African Sanctuary Alliance, Panthera Africa, Prime Earth, RSPCA, SoiDog, Susy Utzinger Foundation for Animal Welfare, Taiwan SPCA, Welttierschutzgesellschaft e.V, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, World Animal Protection and World Parrot Trust.





2. THE DATA

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At no point was the supply of new Fake Rescue content exhausted. The findings in this report only scratch the surface of an extremely popular and increasing trend on social media.

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THE DATA

RESEARCH METHODS

The data used in this report were collected by a team of 14 volunteer researchers between March 29 and May 9, 2024, from Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter/X. These five platforms were chosen due to their worldwide popularity and general accessibility. There are numerous other platforms and online spaces not included, so this is not an exhaustive list.

Prior to the start of the data collection for this report, researchers were briefed on the research project. Step-by-step training videos were provided to explain the snowball sampling method, and the reasoning behind it. A concise and clear online form was provided for data entry. The researchers were assigned specific platforms and provided with specific search terms commonly used in Fake Rescue content. They were asked to use these to find content on the assigned platform they were researching. The frequency of engagement and the use of Fake Rescue search words then generated algorithms that recommended similar types of content to the researchers. Data were logged as either having been located directly from keywords or via the algorithm. The researchers were also asked to note and use other common search terms that they encountered during their research.

The data collected covers not only the descriptive information of the video but also details about the account the content comes from and its legitimacy including account name, number of views, donation asks, association with animal protection organizations, updates on rescued animals or other signs of fake rescue within the content. The data, along with the link and screenshots of the video were logged into a specific form. The form provided our researchers with a list of main Fake Rescue “themes”, describing categories of potential acts of Fake Rescue. A list of indicators of Fake Rescue (clues to help the viewer to identify Fake Rescue content) was provided to the researchers, based on common indicators already identified by SMACC. Researchers were free to choose as many indicators as applicable per each piece of content and had an open field so they could record any other indicators not listed, which led them to believe that the content was fake. Please see Appendices 1 and 2 for details of the main themes and Fake Rescue indicators.

Identification of animal species was completed in two separate phases. First, volunteers had the option to choose a generic category of animals or a species-specific category if they were confident in identification. All of our volunteers received an ID guide for identifying macaque species in particular, due to the prevalence of these species in other cruelty content. The second phase of identification was completed by SMACC coordinators. All of the links were checked and verified for accuracy, using artificial intelligence and our macaque ID guide.

When checking, errors such as duplications or invalid answers were removed. SMACC coordinators then analyzed the results. Approximately 100 videos were removed by SMACC coordinators at that stage because we could not confidently determine whether the rescue shown was, indeed, fake. By the time of content analysis, 232 links had been removed by the platforms or were no longer accessible. However, the data these links provided about Fake Rescue trends were still included in the analysis. At no point was the supply of new Fake Rescue content exhausted. The findings in this report only scratch the surface of an extremely popular and increasing trend on social media.

Additional data on Fake Rescue content, collected and supplied by SMACC member organization Lady Freethinker, and also collected between March and May 2024, were incorporated into the analysis where appropriate, as outlined below.

A group of veterinarians also volunteered to review a select range of content. For each post, each veterinarian assessed the situation, the welfare of the animal involved and the likelihood that the content was genuine. These opinions were based on the limited information available in the content, and should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive assessments. Their comments are included in the report where relevant and do not form part of the analysis, but rather provide extra insight.

LIMITATIONS

There are certain aspects in the process of making this report that are beyond our control and should be acknowledged as they have an effect on the results we achieved. We had both time and geographical constraints. Our researchers are volunteers who have dedicated their time to help us. Even though they are based in different parts of the world, a number of them are actually based in the European continent. The diversity of our result might be impacted according to what content is available in the area our volunteers are based in.

There is also a possibility of human error due to the nature of data collection despite the mitigation methods (e.g. training videos and instructions). Personal judgment was an essential part of the assessment, and mitigation methods were designed to enable such judgments to be as objective as possible. We managed to maintain the credibility of our data by checking each of our records one by one manually.



3. RESULTS

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Fake Rescue content, where animals are intentionally placed in danger for online engagement, is a particularly malicious form of abuse and deception. Unfortunately, many compassionate individuals unknowingly contribute to this problem by sharing and interacting with these videos.

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THE RESULTS

SMACC identified 605 links showing Fake Rescue content. SMACC member Lady Freethinker contributed a further 417 links, bringing the total data set to 1,022 links.

The total data set of 1,022 links was used to analyze the number of Fake Rescue themes on each platform, the number of links from each social media platform, and the total number of links removed or inaccessible to watch (Figures 1, 2, 3).

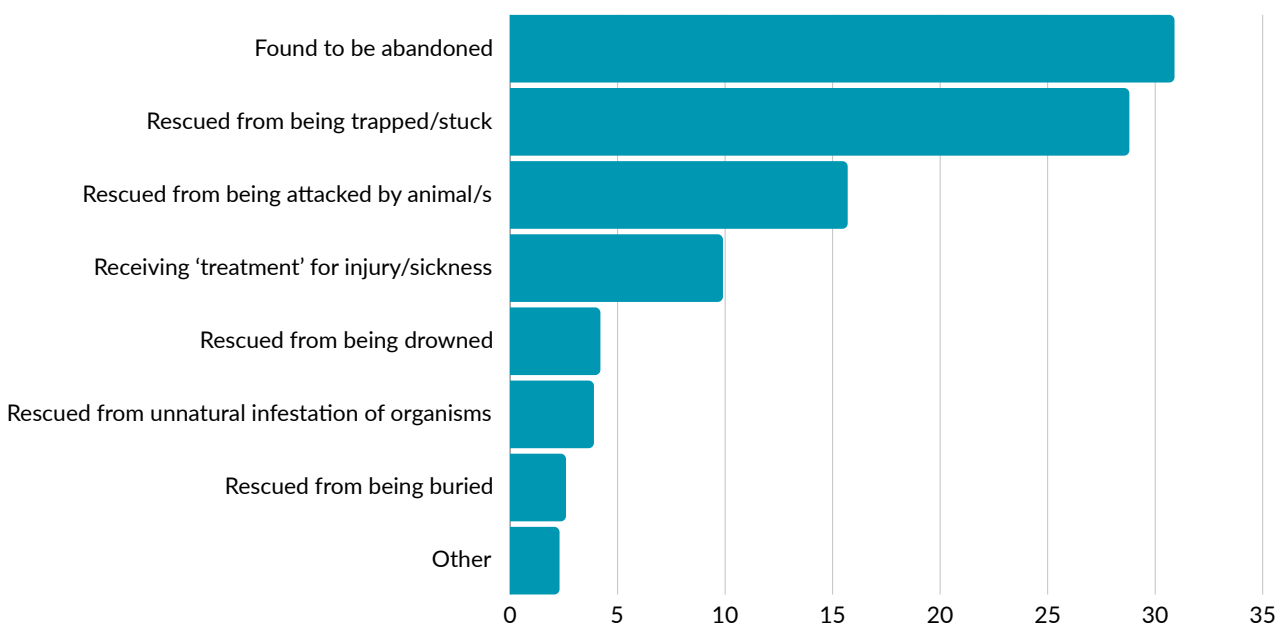
The second data set that contains only the 605 links that SMACC researchers accumulated was used for a more specific analysis to identify the animals involved, the indicators that can be found in each link, the number of views and the monetary donation requests (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

Overall, the total 1,022 links gave a general pattern of the dataset, while the 605 links helped us identify a deeper trend of what lies within the content and the channels.

CONTENT AND ABUSES

The most common Fake Rescue theme identified was “Found to be abandoned” making up 30.9% of the links (where animals are found alone, usually on the street, in rubbish dumps or in unsuitable habitat), followed by “Rescued from being trapped/stuck” with 28.8%. Another 15.7% of links were assigned the theme “Rescued from being attacked by animal/s” (see Figure 1).

 **Figure 1: The total percentage of links assigned to each Fake Rescue Main theme**



The above list of Fake Rescue themes was developed by SMACC before data collection for this project began, based on previous experience. A small proportion of content (2.3%) did not fit the above categories and were allocated “Other” such as “Rescuing from the dog meat trade” and “Buying animals as a form of rescue”.

REMOVED LINKS

99% percent of the links SMACC had gathered were reported to the platforms. From these 605 links, more than 25% of them were removed within a month after we ended the data collection (ended June 2024). When combined with the data gathered by Lady Freethinker, we determined that 22.8% of the 1022 links were either removed by the platform, moved to a private group, or were unavailable at the time of SMACC's analysis.

 **Figure 2: The availability status of Fake Rescue content as of June 13, 2024**

CATEGORY	COUNT	%
Total content	1,022	100.0%
Removed/Unaccessible	233	22.8%
Not removed/Accessible	789	77.2%

Social media wields significant influence on the public, capable of both educating and spreading harmful content. Fake Rescue content, where animals are intentionally placed in danger for online engagement, is a particularly malicious form of abuse and deception. Unfortunately, many compassionate individuals unknowingly contribute to this problem by sharing and interacting with these videos.

We strongly urge social media platforms to take decisive action against all forms of animal cruelty by implementing effective monitoring systems that swiftly detect and remove such harmful material. Public awareness is also vital in identifying and combating this type of content. Please visit our online resources to learn about our 'Five Steps to Stop Online Cruelty' and join us in making a difference.

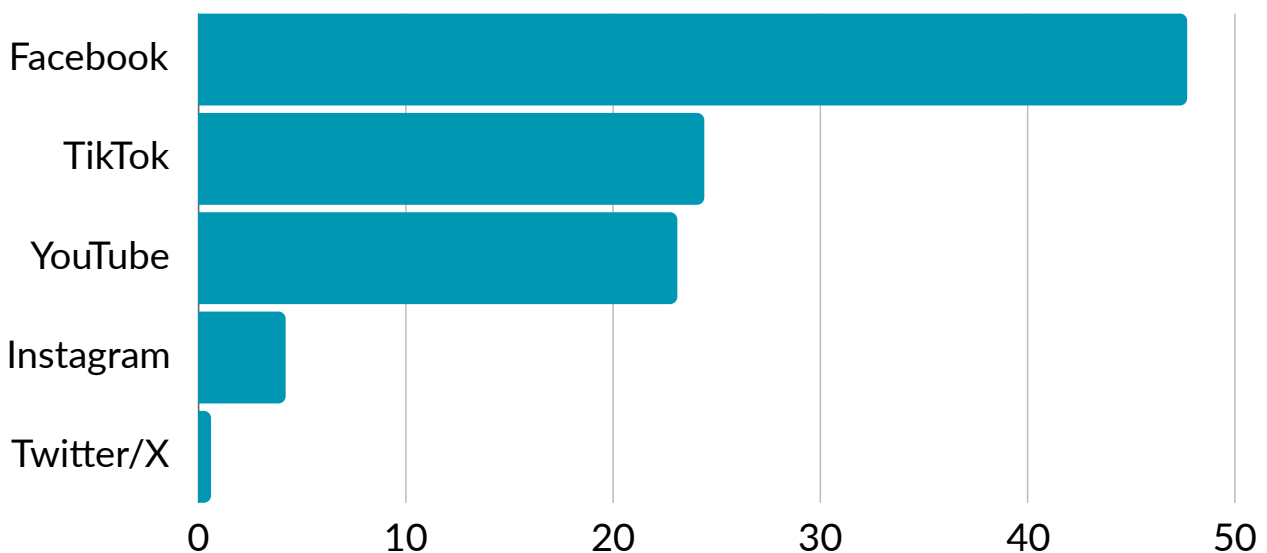
Jill Robinson, Founder of Animals Asia



PLATFORMS

The majority of Fake Rescue content was found on Facebook (47.7%), followed by TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter/X (see Figure 3). Meta owns Facebook and Instagram, so overall 51.9% of content was found on their platforms.

 **Figure 3: The total percentage of Fake Rescue content for each platform**



ANIMALS

Animals featured in the 605 Fake Rescue links recorded by SMACC volunteers were divided into three groups: mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and birds. Mammals appeared far more often than any other group of animals (92%). Among mammals, cats feature the most (42%), followed by primates and dogs. Turtle and snake species were the most common among reptiles and amphibians (Figure 4). We did not record the number of individual animals that appeared in these posts, **but posts containing multiple animals were common, particularly posts showing cats with several kittens. Thus, the number of individual animals involved, while not precisely known, far exceeds the number of posts.**

Among primates, five species of conservation concern, according to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (the world's most comprehensive inventory of the global conservation status of species), were identified.[1]

These species were: long-tailed macaques (Endangered), stump-tailed macaques (Vulnerable), arunachal macaques (Endangered), northern pig-tailed macaques (Vulnerable) and southern pig-tailed macaques (Endangered).[2,3,4,5,6] Similar to the findings in our 2023 research on pet macaques, most of the macaques in the content were still juvenile or even younger.[7]

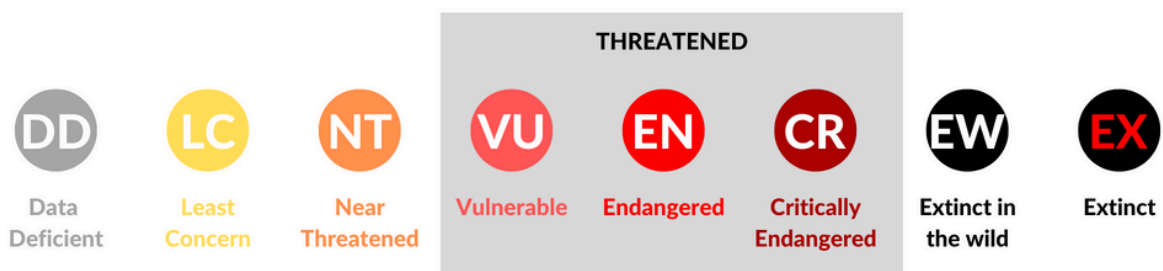
Previous SMACC research found that long-tailed macaques are one of the most common species to feature in social media animal cruelty content.[7,8] It was therefore not a surprise to see this species appear frequently in Fake Rescue content. A further 127 records identified primates but their species could not be ascertained. Many of these may also be threatened species, including one loris of indeterminate species (Appendix 3).

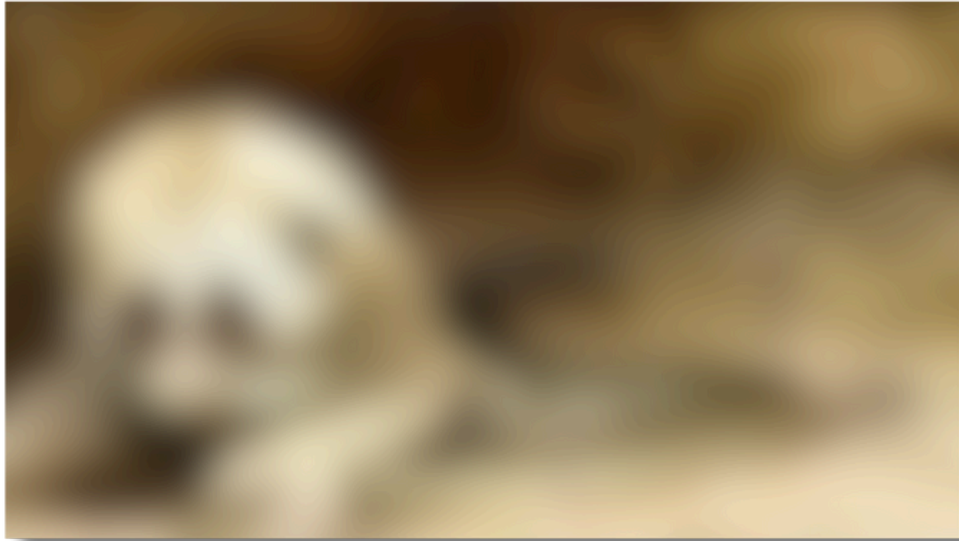
 **Figure 4: The total percentages of animals identified in the content per class**

CLASS	ANIMALS	% OF ANIMALS	TOTAL
Mammals	Cats	41.6%	91.5%
	Primates	28.8%	
	Dogs	20.5%	
	Rabbits	0.3%	
	Goats	0.2%	
	Hedgehogs	0.2%	
Reptiles and Amphibians	Turtles	4.4%	7.9%
	Snakes	2.7%	
	Alligators	0.2%	
	Frogs/Toads	0.2%	
	Unspecified	0.5%	
Birds	Owls	0.2%	0.8%
	Raptors	0.2%	
	Chickens	0.2%	
	Unspecified	0.2%	

To see the full list of animals featured in these posts, please refer to Appendix 3.

IUCN Red List Categories





In this video, the scene is set with footage of a loris climbing, then clips of a snake slithering, into a cave. An extreme conflict between the snake and loris ensues with the snake repeatedly attacking and the loris desperately trying to fight back. The scene then cuts to the two boys walking along, finding the animals and using a stick to poke at the animals. The editing and unlikeliness of the situation show this is Fake Rescue. SMACC ID: reca8W3J4OXqDi8ex

VIEWS

At the time of analysis (May 2024), the 605 links located by SMACC had been watched 572,013,959 times (over half a billion times). Interestingly, total views did not directly correlate with the platform with the most content, with TikTok having the greatest number of views (278,773,973).



Figure 5: The number of views recorded for each platform

PLATFORM	NUMBER OF VIEWS
TikTok	278,773,973
Instagram	164,017,354
YouTube	100,428,036
Facebook	24,573,347
Twitter/X	4,221,249
TOTAL COUNT	572,013,959

INDICATORS

The three most common indicators of Fake Rescue content were:

1. Lack of information to determine if the creator is a genuine animal rescuer or organization ("No genuine animal organization associated") (100%)
2. Scenario promoted as a chance or random encounter, but would be very unlikely to be random or appears insincere ("Unlikely to be a random encounter caught on camera") (88.9%)
3. Multiple videos or other content on an account with a similar setting, storyline, condition or animal ("Page/account has multiple Fake Rescue or similar posts") (80.8%)

The least common indicator was "Species not native to the area/habitat shown". This may be because identification at the species level was not possible and/or a lack of knowledge of the appropriate habitat.




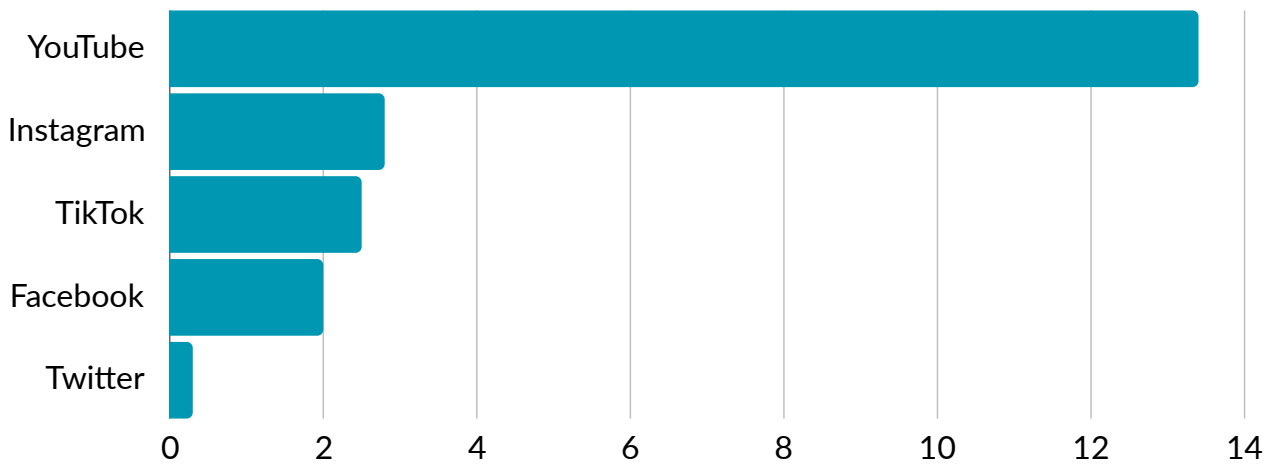
Figure 6: The prevalence of Fake Rescue indicators in terms of the video proportion and the abundance

FAKE RESCUE INDICATORS	% OF VIDEOS
No genuine animal organization associated	100.0%
Unlikely to be a random encounter caught on camera	88.9%
Page/account has multiple fake rescue or similar posts	80.8%
No follow up on what happened to the animals	77.9%
Creator delays assisting the animal to film the situation	67.8%
Clear editing of video	62.6%
Lack of or inappropriate rescue equipment used	49.3%
Other	37.4%
Human "rescuer" is always the same person	26.8%
Medical care or facilities look to be fake or unofficial	26.1%
The same animal/s appear in multiple content	23.6%
Multiple camera angles	17.9%
Species not native to the habitat/area shown	4.0%

ASKS FOR DONATIONS

From the 605 links that SMACC had gathered, 21% had asks for monetary donations, either directly in the content or on the creator's account. This was most common on YouTube. Often, this would directly refer to a need for funds for the care of animals or to enable the rescue of more animals.

 **Figure 7: The total percentage of videos that ask for support in the form of donation, usually through an attached link to an external platform on their profile, description, or an instruction on how to help through the caption**



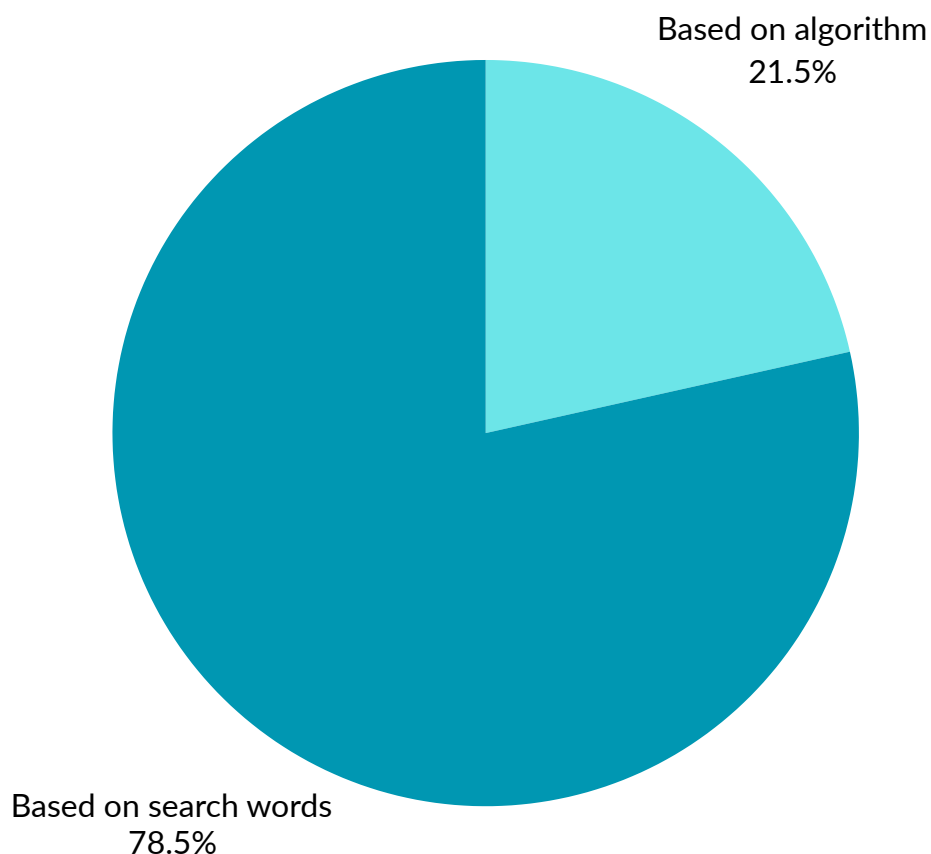
A Fake Rescue showing a young macaque and a toad or frog stuck (right) inside an electric cooling fan. It is highly unlikely that a monkey and the frog/toad would have been able to lock themselves inside the fan by accident, showing that the content creator placed them there to film.

SMACC ID: [recCFf3Ygq4f8mDVf](#)

ORIGIN OF LINKS

From the 605 links that SMACC had gathered, almost 22% of the content appeared in our researcher's dashboard without a manual search. This demonstrates how platforms recommend similar content that users have engaged with, programmed through their algorithms. Approximately 79% of the content gathered was collected through manual research.

 **Figure 8: The total percentage of videos obtained through manual search and the platform's algorithm**



“ Posts containing multiple animals were common, particularly posts showing cats with several kittens. Thus, the number of individual animals involved, while not precisely known, far exceeds the number of posts. ”



4. THE PROBLEM

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As well as risking serious injury and death, the acute stress associated with Fake Rescue can severely impact the animals' immediate and longer term mental and physical health.

”

THE PROBLEM

THE ANIMALS

A fundamental aspect of any Fake Rescue video is that the animals must be placed in some form of danger or harm in order to create compelling rescue narratives. This, of course, places the animal at risk and causes extreme stress, even if they are “rescued” by the end of the video. The scenarios (or Fake Rescue “themes”) can be extremely dangerous, nearly always threatening their health and often, their lives. Animals may sustain injuries that may not be visible on camera. There may be situations in which the animals are not rescued in time, and indeed are injured or killed in the process. All Fake Rescue situations cause stress to the animal featured.

As well as risking serious injury and death, the acute stress associated with Fake Rescue can severely impact the animals’ immediate and longer term mental and physical health. This includes “weight loss, immunosuppression or reproductive failure”.^[9] Spontaneous abortion can occur in cats who are experiencing trauma.^[10] Even wild animals who face stressful challenges in the wild, such as predator/prey interactions featured in many Fake Rescue videos, may experience something akin to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).^[11,12]

Creators who produce content regularly may use the same animals numerous times, filming multiple takes, exposing animals to repeated stress and risks. This can create fear or anxiety disorders in animals.^[13] Living with a long term fear or anxiety disorder has been linked to negative health impacts in animals, just as it would be in humans.^[14,15]

As is the case for most animal cruelty content, it is almost impossible to know what happens to the animals before and after filming, or what their life-long care is like. It is unknown what conditions the animals are being kept in, how they are treated by the content creator, what their diet is like, whether they live with members of their own species, or if they are kept in environments that can meet their social and physical needs.

In Fake Rescue content, information about what happens to the animals after “rescue” is rarely provided. However, SMACC has noted that creators are beginning to address this by including footage of the “rescued” animals looking healthy. We theorize that the healthy animals are filmed prior to the rescue, and that the animals are mistreated or made to appear unwell for the rescue portion of the content.

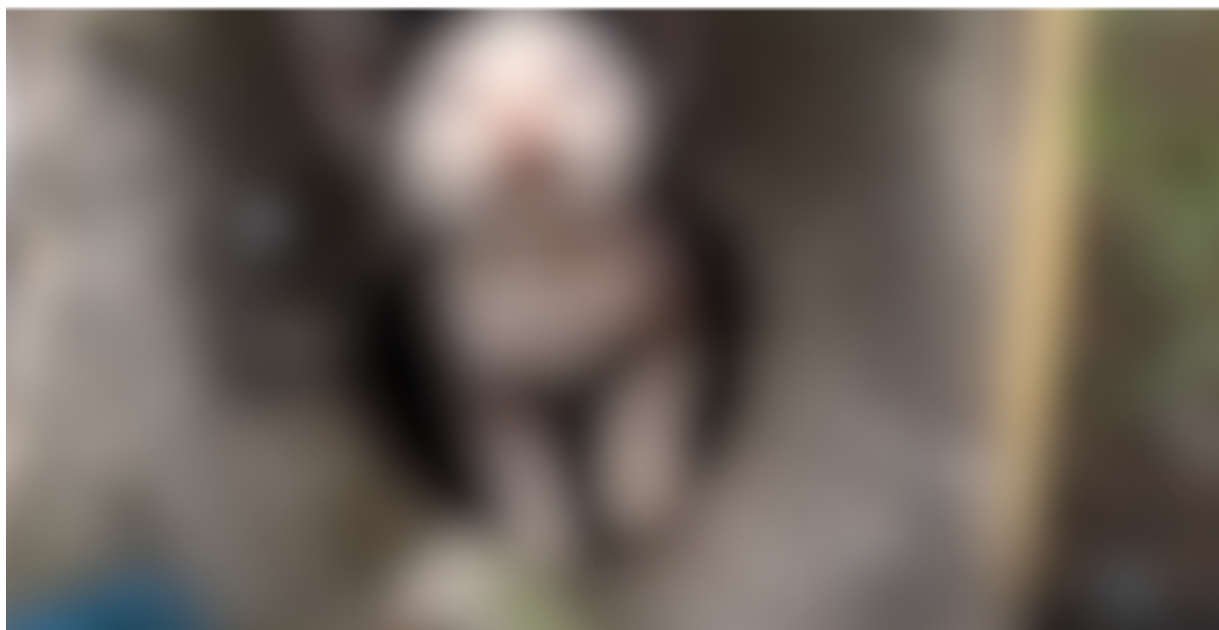
“ We theorize that the healthy animals are filmed prior to the rescue, and that the animals are mistreated or made to appear unwell for the rescue portion of the content. ”

Wild animals often appear in Fake Rescue content, raising a range of additional welfare concerns. There are great concerns about the keeping of wild animals in captivity as pets and as the subjects of social media content. To learn more about this issue, please read SMACC's Spotlight Report on the keeping of wild animals kept as pets.[8] These animals may be removed from the wild or taken from their family groups, and young animals are frequently used because they are easier to handle. It is unclear where the content creators source the animals from. Individuals of threatened species, such as long-tailed macaques, also feature in a great deal of Fake Rescue content.

EVOLVING CONTENT

Another major problem is the difficulty of identifying the content as fake. In the past, Fake Rescue content was easier to identify. Because it was generally poorly made, and contained little narrative, it appeared disingenuous. **It seems that Fake Rescue content is evolving, and creators are increasingly mimicking genuine animal rescue accounts.** This means there may be indicators in Fake Rescue content that are also found in genuine rescue content. That is why multiple indicators need to be considered when establishing whether content is genuine or fake, as outlined later in this report.

Those who wish to spread misinformation online or create “viral” content now have an increasingly sophisticated number of tools at their disposal, such as access to video equipment, editing software, artificial intelligence, and “bots” to disseminate and boost fake content.[16] This may make Fake Rescue content increasingly difficult to detect in the future, therefore requiring ongoing investigation.



A kitten “rescued” from a concrete hole in a Fake Rescue video. The kitten is likely to have been placed in the hole for the content creation. No official animal NGO is involved, the video is clearly edited, the creator delays assisting the animal to film the situation, and the account has multiple similar videos, which are all indicators of Fake Rescue content. SMACC ID: rec3FWKi2mQZ3Clz5

The assessments of Fake Rescue made by our researchers and the SMACC team are based on our knowledge of animal welfare, animal rescue and the opinions of selected vets who assisted with content analysis. SMACC is acutely aware that these experts are viewing content with knowledge the average viewer does not have about animals.

The SMACC team has watched hundreds of Fake Rescue videos, and has identified common patterns, including the style of the video, the appearance of the account and the flow of the narrative. Therefore, our guidance to the public on identifying such content must include clear indicators and encourage viewers to employ critical thinking about what they are watching.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

Content involving animals makes up a significant share of social media content. Heartwarming animal stories, often depicting their rescue by humans, is one of the many forms this takes. “Pet influencers” are now a recognized distinct group of online creators who have a large following on social media, with some accounts having tens of millions of followers.[17] The Dodo, a content curation site focused purely on animal content and known for its animal rescues and stories of happy endings, receives five million views a month.[18]

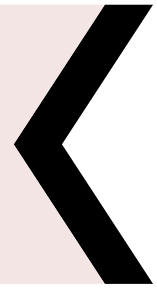
The Dodo has channels on most major social media platforms and an article from 2019 estimated that the Dodo YouTube channel alone is worth US\$18 million. Multiple articles exist online instructing creators how to make impactful animal content online, sharing tips on how to create content and make money from it.[19,20,21]

SMACC’s data shows that just 605 Fake Rescue videos had over 572,013,959 views collectively. Some individual videos had around 155,000,000 views alone.

At the time of data collection on May 4, 2024, a Fake Rescue video of a kitten being rescued from the side of the road had 128,000 views. Upon data review for the report in early June 2024, this video had 136,000 views, an increase of 8,000 views in a month. This testifies to the rapid rate at which videos can be viewed. It is clear that animal content is popular with social media users and potentially lucrative for those who can secure a following.

A number of creators mimic the styles of genuine animal rescue organizations, in order to give an impression that they are legitimate. The channel name or account name usually mentions animal rescue or animal sanctuary, or has a descriptive title such as “save the cats.” The content of these channels is often exclusively “rescue” content. They may even have a channel logo or brand.

“ A Fake Rescue video of a kitten being rescued from the side of the road had 128,000 views. Upon data review for the report in early June 2024, this video had 136,000 views, an increase of 8,000 views in a month.



Fake Rescue content creators try to draw viewers in by using a variety of tactics and signals. For example, video titles almost always mention an animal in need of help or rescue. Some use particularly dramatic language such as “saved from death”, “kind person rushed into the water to save kitten” or “rescued a dying cat” to draw the viewer into watching the video. Thumbnails usually show a dramatic snapshot of what is occurring in the video to catch the viewers’ attention. The captions on the video that tell the story of what is happening are often written in the first person, stating things such as “I found this animal”, despite there not being any further information on who the person is in the video or the channel.

As content creators continue to develop and professionalize their Fake Rescue content, it is becoming more challenging for viewers, animal advocates and indeed social media platforms to confidently identify such content as fake. **Suspicious must be confirmed by additional research, considering the entire account, the other types of content that they share, and the presence or absence of any indications of a legitimate rescue organization.** It is reasonable to assume that few social media users spend time doing such checks when scrolling through their social media feeds. This is a real challenge for animal advocates trying to engage with the public and provide guidance about identifying and reporting Fake Rescue to the platforms.

Many of the Fake Rescue channels appear to be resharing content from other accounts. SMACC often finds the same video of the same “rescue” on multiple pages, but each page strives to give the impression that they have themselves carried out the action in the video. This leads to the spread of such content.

572,013,959

five hundred seventy-two million, thirteen thousand and nine hundred fifty nine

TOTAL NUMBER OF VIEWS FOR 605 LINKS RECORDED



Two separate videos showing puppies in need of rescue. Animals are often seen trapped, stuck, or tied up in various ways in Fake Rescue content. SMACC ID: recyRIWOH081fAkV and recZnf2Hzd2pZXeCu

One particular account on Instagram has its own branding, a logo and asks for donations. The account has 112,000 followers and shares regular content of animals rescued from the streets. One of their videos with over 32,000 likes shows a puppy outdoors, covered in snow, looking very lethargic. The person picks up the puppy, takes them indoors and is shown toweling the puppy, apparently bringing them back to good health. As convincing as this account and their videos are, on inspection of this video, one veterinarian commented:

It's not uncommon to have baby animals die in the cold weather, especially if they are sick or abandoned. The puppy from the snow in the first part of the video was pretty small and should have been with its mother still, so it is likely that it could have been frozen in the snow, about to die. The puppy in the second part of the video wasn't the same puppy - it was much older and in good condition. So this compilation wasn't genuine, although I do think the pup in the snow was really freezing.

In response to press criticism about the pervasiveness of animal cruelty content on their platforms, social media companies consistently reply with general statements that they do not accept such content on their platform and that they encourage members of the public report instances when they appear. However, SMACC member organization World Animal Protection found that viewers are often unable to identify Fake Rescue content.[22]

CASE STUDY: World Animal Protection

Viewers are unreliable watchdogs for cruel or inappropriate wild animal content on social media

There is an abundance of videos on YouTube showing people rescuing animals (domestic and wild) from a variety of predicaments (natural or otherwise). It is hard to tell, however, whether the scenes captured in these videos show people helping animals or putting them in greater peril. Currently, there is little external regulation of social media platforms and detection of inappropriate content is largely dependent on viewer reporting. The popularity of animal rescue videos and the lack of oversight raise concerns about animal welfare and conservation and we want to understand more about how viewers react to these videos.

To explore viewer responses to animal rescue videos, we used a set of 241 videos showing humans rescuing domestic and wild animals (dogs, cats, chickens, but also a monitor lizard and an adult crocodile). In these videos, people were rescuing the animals from attack by a predator (usually a python).



Screenshots of 'fake animal rescue' videos downloaded from YouTube. Videos were posted between September 2018 and July 2021, and screenshots taken between June and August 2021. All but two of the videos included in the study had been removed by YouTube at the time of writing. Supplied by World Animal Protection.

This study is a case study to explore the response of viewers to these types of videos. Various aspects of the videos suggest that they are “fake” and that they subject both the animal being attacked, and the attacking animal, to considerable stress. Only five of the videos had sufficient viewer comments for analysis, but these revealed that whilst some viewers clearly recognized the animal cruelty involved and the fake nature of the videos, others appeared to enjoy the videos, were impressed and/or found them humorous. Two of the 22 wild species identified in the videos are considered to be Critically Endangered in the wild, yet none of the viewers referred to their threatened status (presumably due to lack of expert knowledge). None of the viewers questioned the legality of keeping these species as pets, or the use of these animals for entertainment. Importantly, although all videos received relatively few “likes”, they also received few “dislikes”. Some viewers suggested in the comments that these videos should be “reported” but there was little evidence that they would have been removed in the absence of external pressure.

Our analysis of viewer responses to Fake Rescue videos on YouTube suggests that many viewers are either not aware of, or are unconcerned by, the animal welfare or conservation issues associated with these videos. In light of these results, we suggest that major social media companies need to do far more in terms of taking responsibility for the content they host on their platforms, ensuring that animals featured in videos and posts are portrayed in a way that promotes an appropriate relationship between wild animals and people.

It is deeply concerning that in the pursuit of social media likes and shares for profit, some individuals deliberately engage in animal cruelty to deceive the public by staging fake “rescues.” Animals, like humans, are sentient beings. They can feel emotions, form bonds, and suffer both physically and psychologically. When animals are manipulated or placed in harmful situations for the sake of dramatic social media content, their welfare is severely compromised. The stress and trauma inflicted upon them can have lasting effects, manifesting in behaviors indicative of anxiety and distress, as well as physical injuries. Social media platforms must do more to tackle and identify fake rescue content and remove it from their platforms, whilst the work of genuine animal rescue organizations should be protected and promoted on social media.



Tricia Croasdell, CEO of World Animal Protection

Fake Rescue content can teach viewers incorrect or inappropriate ways to interact with animals. This is especially true where animals are being given care or medical treatment unnecessarily or by unskilled people.

For example, one video portrayed the rescue of kittens who had apparently been dumped in a plastic bag, and who appeared lethargic and unwell. The rescuer is seen feeding the kittens milk with a small syringe. One kitten is placed on their back while being fed, which is a dangerous position for a cat to be feeding. If fluid goes into the lungs, it may cause aspiration pneumonia, which can increase risk of infection and cause inflammation, breathing difficulties or death.[23] Viewers may see this scenario and repeat these incorrect and potentially dangerous methods with other animals.



Four kittens rescued from a plastic bag abandoned in water (Image 1). The kittens appear to be unable to move but have their eyes wide open. After the “rescue” the video shows the kittens looking healthier, being fed with what looks like powder-based milk. The kitten is placed on their back which is dangerous, and runs the risk of aspiration pneumonia (Image 4). This account also asked for donations from viewers. SMACC ID: recmP9sw97YDEG0qo

Many viewers of Fake Rescue content express support in their comments for the actions depicted. Social media algorithms boost content with high levels of engagement. Thus, Fake Rescue content that is highly interacted with is captured by the algorithm, reaches more people and therefore, engagement increases even further. Some of the videos SMACC identified had millions of views with primarily positive comments. This further incentivizes creators to continue creating Fake Rescue content.

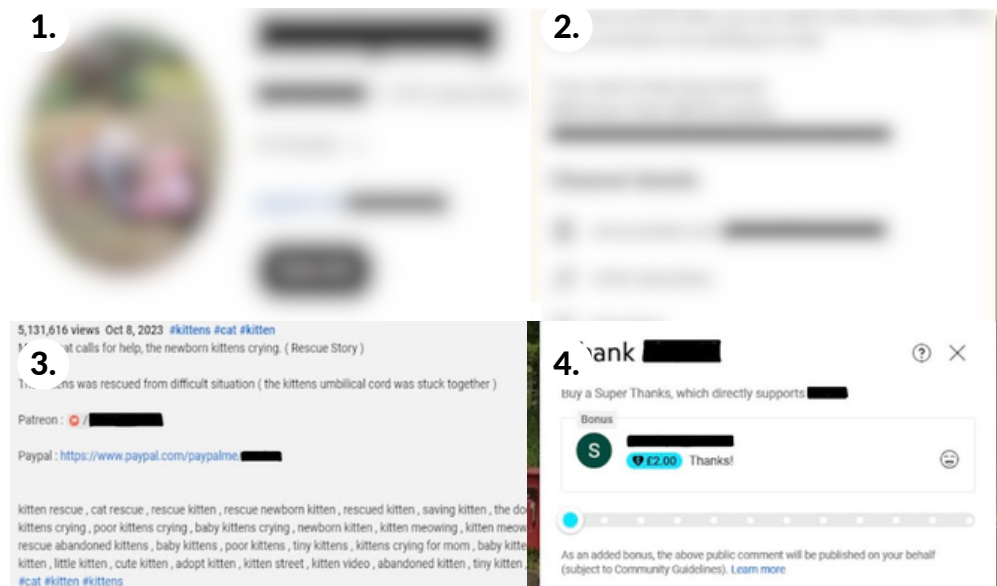


Examples of positive comments on Fake Rescue content. Viewers clearly feel an emotional response to seeing such content. SMACC ID: re1SpbUn0u76Fdah

MONETIZATION

It is clear that there are distinct motivations for creators of Fake Rescue content. **Making money is a major motivator for those who disseminate misleading information online, and there is money to be made from content that is popular on social media.**[24]

In portraying themselves as genuine animal rescuers, the creators of Fake Rescue can encourage viewers to give money for the care of the animals or to help other animals in need. PayPal, cryptocurrency links or email addresses are usually provided for donors, rather than links to donation platforms or charity websites. One account was found to use YouTube's digital feature "Super Thanks" which "lets creators earn revenue and connect with viewers who want to show extra gratitude for their content".[25] Some links were also found to encourage audiences to buy the products they sell from an external website, as a way to help their cause. These donation requests are sometimes made in the video directly, in the video description or on the account page.



Examples of how Fake Rescue accounts ask for donations. It can be done through PayPal, cryptocurrency, YouTube's digital feature called Super Thanks or other forms of money transaction platforms. SMACC ID: recmtX3Wr4x91zKl8, recGWc4btKfj34dlb, rechJxcTsJ8757Hk, and recUKqVvJkzadzpim

Donations made through such channels will not be used to rescue animals but are pocketed by the creators. Donations fuel the creation of more Fake Rescue videos, putting more animals in dangerous and stressful situations.

As with other forms of animal cruelty content, Fake Rescue creators could also be making money via monetization of their content. This is where the creator is paid for advertisements to appear on their content, by meeting certain criteria to be eligible for monetization, usually high engagement levels on their content or number of viewers and followers of their accounts. In a 2020 review carried out by Lady Freethinker examining 2,000 cruelty videos, it was estimated that animal cruelty content on YouTube could be generating up to US\$15 million for users and \$12 million for YouTube itself.[26] However, since then, YouTube has started to broadcast ads on non-partner channels, making it impossible to tell which channels are earning money.

This money-making under the guise of animal welfare is systematic and puts many animal lovers in a difficult situation: they mean well and cause further animal suffering without realizing it. It is therefore extremely important to raise more awareness. We are committed to ensuring that social media consumers must be able to recognise whether those who share such content are working seriously and sustainably.

Myrto Joannidis, Susy Utzinger Stiftung für Tierschutz



5. TYPES OF FAKE RESCUE

“

A genuine animal rescuer would not allow the animal to suffer any longer than necessary and would proceed to rescue the animal immediately rather than documenting extensively the animal's distress and situation.

”

TYPES OF FAKE RESCUE

ABANDONED

The most common theme of Fake Rescue features animals who appear to have been abandoned, without a home or without the care of their families in the wild. This usually features young animals such as kittens or infant monkeys alone on the ground and in distress. Some may be so young that they are not able to move confidently by themselves. There is often text on the video, helping to establish the Fake Rescue narrative around the young animal being cold, lonely, abandoned, hungry or crying.

This type of Fake Rescue makes up 30.9% of the total 1,022 links, with YouTube having the most Abandoned content, compared to the rest of the platforms we investigated. This is followed by Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and Twitter/X in descending order.

While these situations do occur, Fake Rescues stand out for a number of reasons. Before the fake rescuer intervenes, the animal is typically filmed for a prolonged period of time to show the situation the animal is in and how they are suffering. **A genuine animal rescuer would not allow the animal to suffer any longer than necessary and would proceed to rescue the animal immediately rather than documenting extensively the animal's distress and situation.** Follow-up information about the animal would also usually be available, as well as their situation after the rescue. The volume of similar content appearing on social media indicates that this occurrence may be happening too often than is true in reality, as most of the videos appear to have the exact same setup, as well as editing, and similar language in the titles and captions.



Animals are found alone in a dangerous environment, Image 1 shows the puppy is trapped in a plastic bag that looks like it is intentionally stuck under a component of the railway, which makes it harder for the puppy to get away. Image 2 shows a kitten looking unconscious under the railway.

SMACC ID: recXXwCMPsftbVNje and recW98rDVYhnlNaZb

Many content creators show cats and puppies found in rubbish dumps or in bins, typically trapped inside plastic bags. The setup and the narrative are always the same - the creators have just “found them by accident”. One variation of this trend involves videos of people “stumbling upon” cats and dogs chained or tied to train tracks. In one video posted to TikTok with over one million views, a small puppy is seen stuck in a net on the railway. A person then removes the animal from the tracks. In a similar video posted to Facebook with nearly 200,000 views, a tiny kitten is shown wedged in the railroad tracks and rescued.

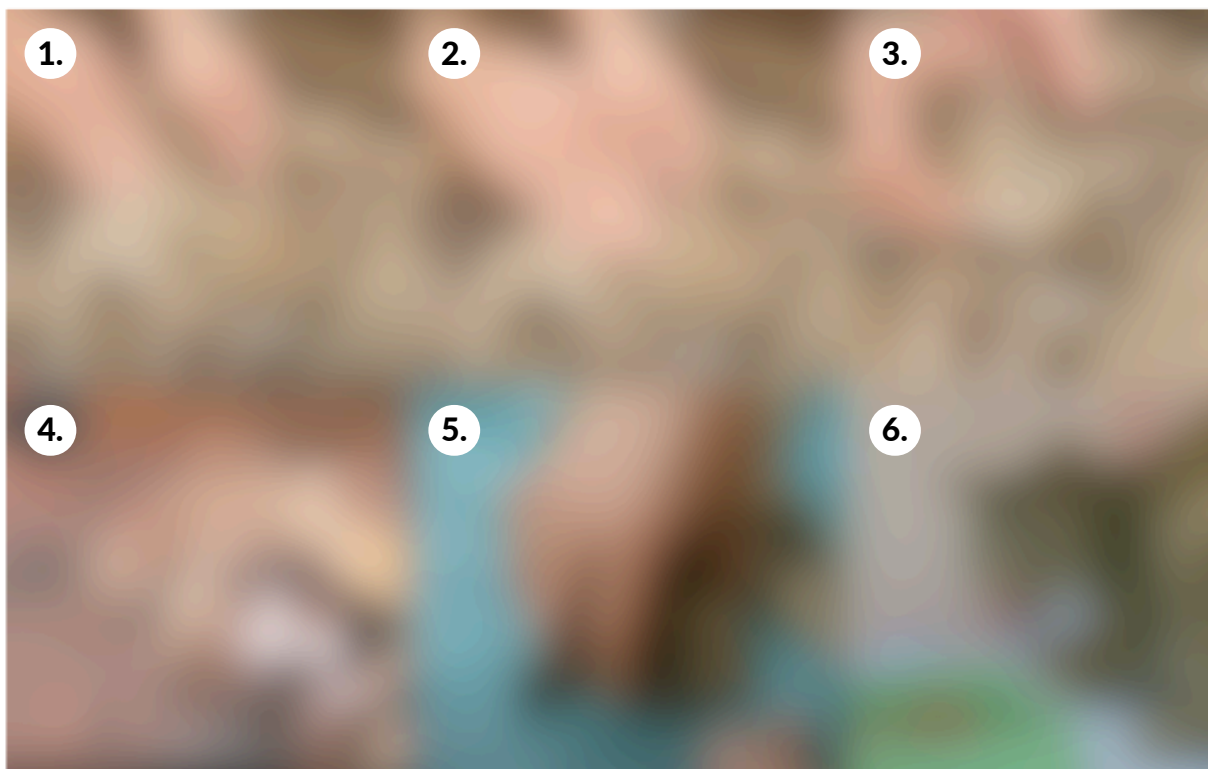
A common scenario depicted in Fake Rescue content shows a mother cat and her kittens found in a precarious situation, such as living in the trash, under a tree or bush, or on the side of the road. We see the mother cat is unable to stand, looks weak and seriously unwell, with her kittens surrounding her, meowing and trying to feed from her. The narrative is that the mother cat is ill and in great need of help, and her kittens' lives are at risk because of her condition in the video. The content usually has a title containing wording like “mother cat is dying”, “kitten begging to be rescued”, or “crying in despair”. We see the person rescuing the mother and kittens, taking them home and feeding them. Some even depict themselves saving the mother cat from near death.

The lack of detail on the illness of the cat, the identity of the rescuer or the post-rescue information, raises suspicion that the video’s aftermath showing how the cats are fed and healthy actually happens before the rescue. There is no information on the video that can verify this, but captioning them with “before” and “after” should not be taken as evidence of a real rescue.

If these rescues are indeed fake, there are concerns around whether the mother cat has been intentionally put in this state for the creation of the content, perhaps through drugging. Signs of drugging include dilated pupils, motionless muscles around the eyes, inability to stand on all feet and unresponsiveness when approached.[27] Miraculously, after injections, veterinary visits or food, they are able to function better.

Upon reviewing one of these videos, showing a cat on a railway unable to move, one of our veterinarian reviewers stated:

There is a chance the animal might be drugged because its pupils are different sizes. Drugs like opioids or sedatives can make pupils either larger (dilated) or smaller (constricted). However, pupil size in cats can change for many reasons including lighting and stress. A concerning sign is that this channel has uploaded similar videos featuring cats with similar pupil conditions. This pattern suggests a potential trend of drugging or manipulating the animals for video content. Recognizing the pattern of the same rescuer, specific locations where the animals are found and other suspicious elements strongly suggests that these are not genuine rescue videos.



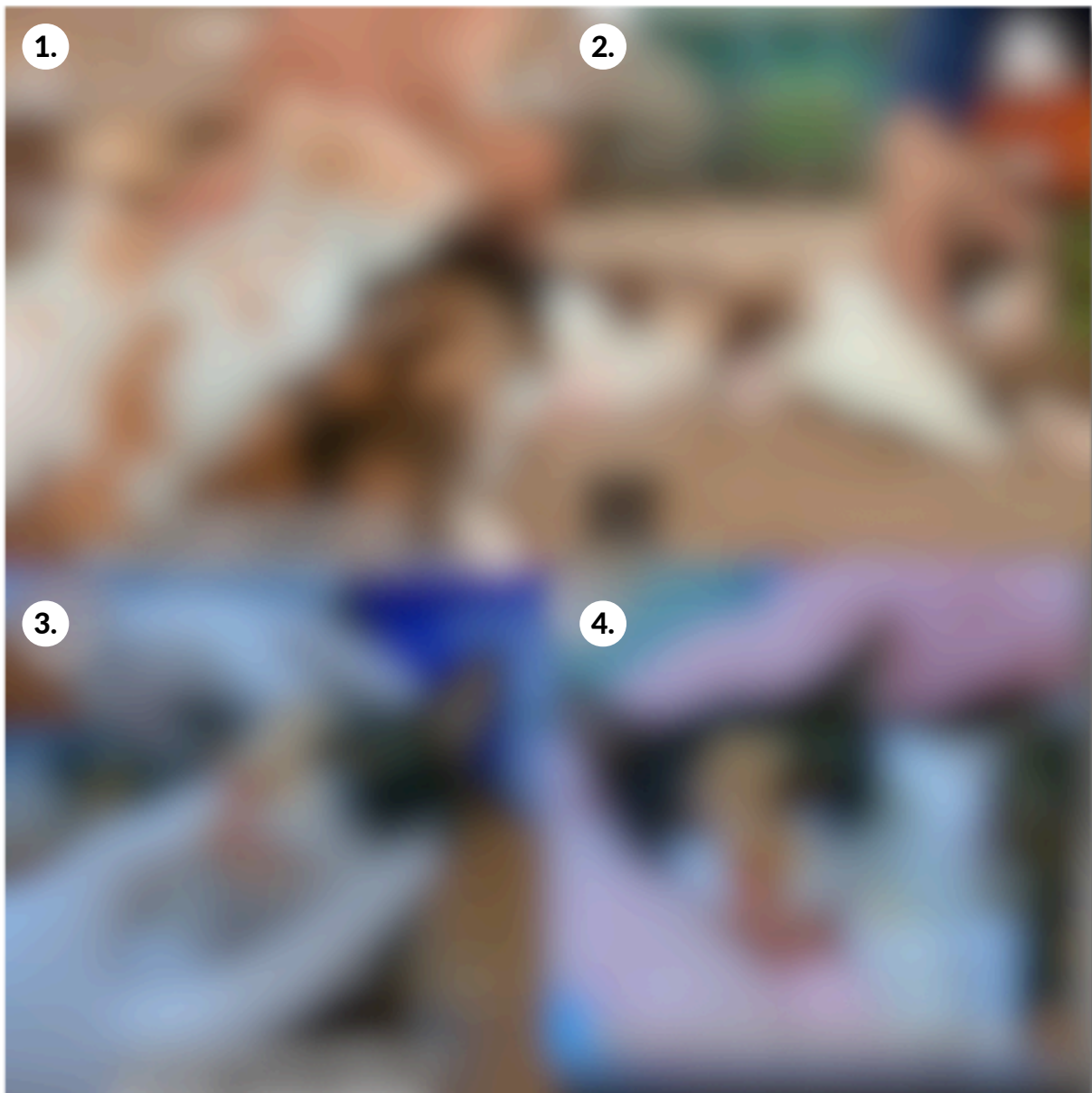
Screenshots of a few scenes of a video ordered chronologically, showing a cat that is unable to stand on her legs, has dilated pupils and no muscle movement around the eyes (Image 1-4). Screenshots show the cat being examined by what seems to be a vet. Notice that the rescuer in Image 1-4 and the vet in Image 5 have the same ring on the same right hand, indicating the possibility of them being the same person and therefore raising suspicion that this is a staged rescue. SMACC ID: recD9idL0dd7Da08w

Another similar review from a veterinarian highlighted:

The cat seems lethargic when being picked up. In a normal state of consciousness, cats would have eyelid/"palpebral reflex". When the cat went into the box and bumped her face to the corner of the box, the reflex was not stimulated and the eyes remained open. The lack of "palpebral reflex" can be caused by neurological diseases or certain anesthetic drugs.

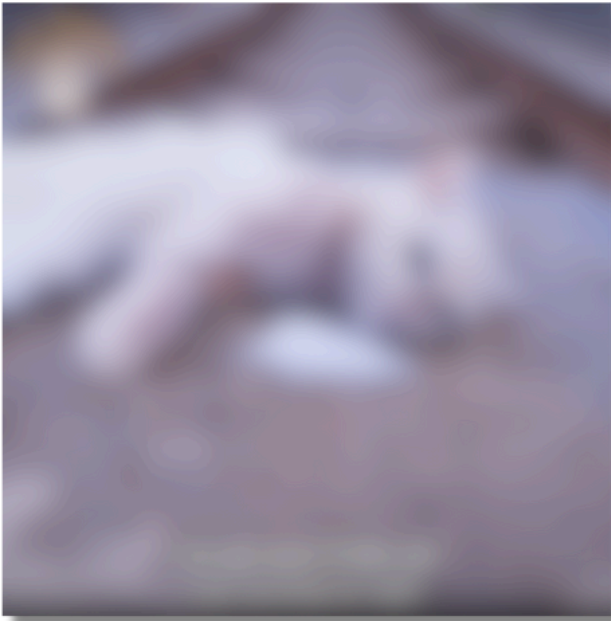
When the cat was inside the box, we can see a shaking movement of her head which is common to see as a response of starting to be conscious from anesthesia but it is also possible that the cat is suffering from a neurological illness that might cause ataxia or loss of muscle coordination.

The state of the cat before and after "rescue" is very different. The post-rescue scenario shows that the cat was more alert and her head was no longer shaking. Her "palpebral reflex" was present when the kitten's tail was touching her eye.



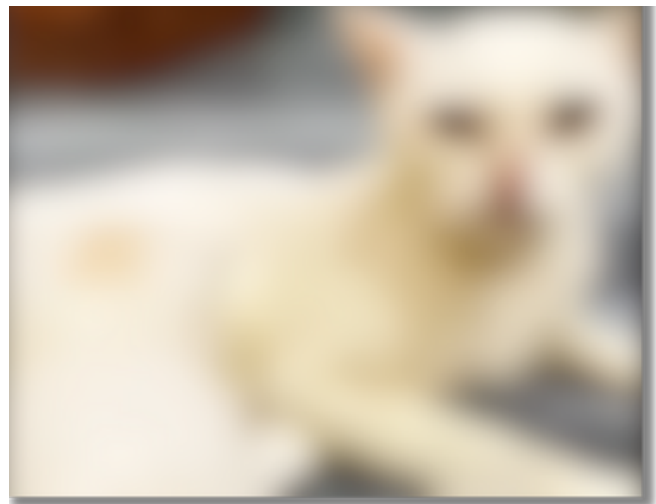
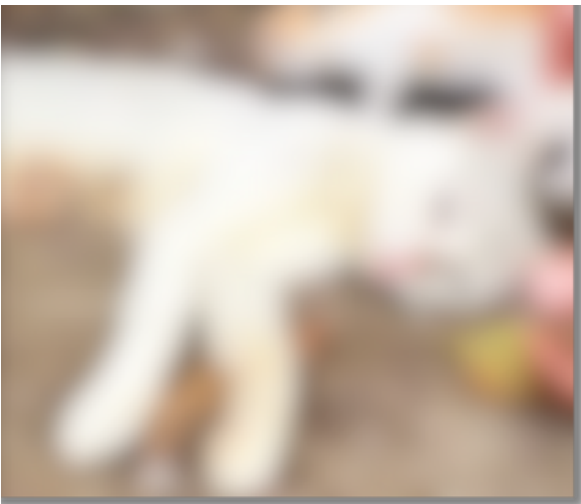
Screenshots of a few scenes of a video ordered chronologically, showing a cat that is unable to move and has an absent- looking stare. Notice that even though images come from different videos, Image 1 shows that the rescuer is checking the pulse of the cat with a two-finger method. It can also be seen that this rescuer and the rescuer from the previous series of screenshots has a similar-looking ring on the right hand ring finger. Image 3 shows the state of absent- looking stare with dilated pupils when being checked by a vet, and when compared to Image 4, the distinct condition of the eyes are visible. SMACC ID: recUE5hYhSKVOQmuX

Based on the veterinarians' reviews, this type of content does have the possibility of being authentic, but the number of videos that have the same storyline, the lethargic and unresponsive situation of the cat, and the aftermath of the rescue all raise suspicions. This is illustrated by the previous images and the ones below, showing screenshots of different videos of different cats with comparable conditions. The screenshots of the cats were taken from different videos but were exhibiting comparable conditions.



Screenshots of the before and after condition of an abandoned cat that is found on a railway, similar to the previous series of screenshots. The cat has a dilated pupil and an absent- minded stare before the rescue happens. Moreover, it seems that the cat exerts white foam from the mouth.

SMACC ID: rechiJWbLRfqvY68h



Screenshots of the before and after condition of an abandoned cat with kittens (not shown), with a similar pre- rescue condition as the other examples above. SMACC ID: recyrHCrfwHIHADXI

The setting up of fake rescues is a particularly vile and sickening way to exploit and abuse animals for money - and even more so because it plays on the compassion and kindness of an unwitting audience that is eager to see suffering animals saved from harm. It is easy to be misled into thinking a scene of an animal needing help is genuine and that is why it's essential that social media platforms do much, much more to identify and remove this type of content.



Alan Knight, President of International Animal Rescue (IAR)

Fake rescues are a particularly perfidious example of animal cruelty content on social media. Animal welfare organizations like us depict rescues to draw attention to abuse and make our animal welfare work transparent. We are grateful that many users are interested in this content, follow their love for animals and watch/share these videos. They enjoy the 'happy endings' of a real, sad story and become part of our animal welfare work to make more animal rescue possible. The fact that animal abusers are now precisely exploiting the goodwill of animal-loving people in order to make money with animal cruelty is malicious and wrong.



**Wiebke Plasse, Head of Communications and Fundraising,
Welttierschutzgesellschaft e.V. (WTG)**

TRAPPED/STUCK

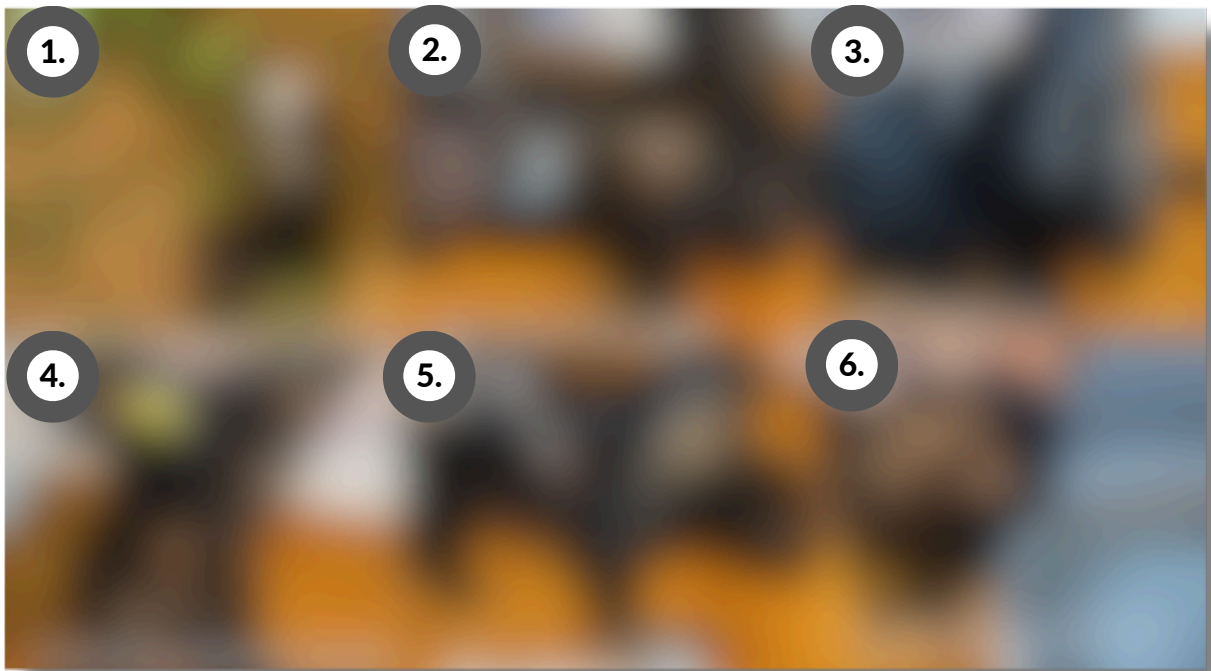
This type of content shows animals trapped under an object, such as a fallen log, a stone or other large heavy object. The animals are struggling to escape and are clearly in distress. They are commonly seen trapped in unlikely objects, for example, the frames and wheels of bicycles. These same objects appear in multiple videos, indicating that creators are copying each other. Explanations are not provided about how the animal became trapped, or the follow up of the animal following the rescue.

This type of Fake Rescue comprised 28.8% of the links we acquired and most were found on Facebook, followed by TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter/X. The content is designed to give the appearance that the rescuer came across the animal by chance.

Another common indicator is that the animals are often shown trapped for a length of time, before the creator intervenes to assist the animal. The frequency with which this type of incident appears - 29% of our data - suggests content creators intentionally trap animals in or under items.

One video posted on Facebook shows a puppy in a pile of garbage with their head stuck in a bottle. The opening of the bottle seems to have been cut to fit the puppy's head inside. A man in a generic "Animal Shelter Rescue Team" shirt, who does not show his face, carries out the "rescue" and the animal is taken to a vet. The video had been viewed two million times as of the time of writing (July 2024). Whilst this creator had clearly made an effort to appear genuine, a review of this video by a veterinarian stated:

The video raises concerns. The syringe appears too large for a puppy, and it's unclear where the injection went. Additionally, filming the puppy struggling in a water bottle for one minute, maybe more before the edit, which suggests that the creator focuses on creating dramatic content rather than genuine rescue.



Screenshots of a puppy rescue in chronological order. It lingers on the puppy's desperation to be released from the bottle before the rescue process happens. Image 3 shows the use of a thermometer that is tucked between the puppy's body and thigh. Image 4 shows the puppy being given an eye medication with no context of purpose. Image 5 shows a blurred process of injection. Image 6 gives an explanation that the puppy gets dewormed, vaccinated and then bathed by the same person with the black gloves that has carried out the entire examination. SMACC ID: recgLv0t455rJiGG3

SMACC identified another video depicting an almost identical event taking place in a very similar location, adding to the suspicion that the content is fake. When asked if the rescue shown was carried out appropriately, another veterinarian stated,

No. They were just watching and recording instead of helping the animal.



A screenshot of a puppy's head being stuck inside a can, similar to the scene in the previous series of images. These are from different videos, showing that similar scenarios are used by creators. SMACC ID: recUxIP9VDeONpJlb

ANIMAL ATTACKS AND FIGHTS

Staged animal attacks are a common form of Fake Rescue, making up 15.7% of our content. In this type of content, kittens, puppies, chickens, monkeys or other small animals are placed in close proximity to a predatory animal such as a snake, eagle or crocodilian species. A human rescuer saves the prey animal at the last moment.

This type of content can be easier to detect with experience, as the setting is often very similar. Animals are placed in a red dirt cave or hole dug out of the earth, with the prey animal clearly placed inside. Alternatively, animals, often macaques, are shown placed in muddy puddles with other animals attacking them. Snakes are frequently used as the predator species. In these videos, the snake is usually wrapped fully around the prey animal, apparently constricting them, before the rescuer intervenes. Domestic animals are also used as prey, such as kittens, dogs, ducks and goats.

Situations like those normally depicted in this type of content are very unlikely to occur by chance, as the species involved would not often encounter one another naturally. SMACC member World Animal Protection commented: "If the predator or prey animals are in settings that you would not usually expect to find under normal circumstances, such as a forest restricted species out in open scrubland, it is more likely that the animals have been intentionally placed into that scenario in order to create the content." [28]

This was one of the first forms of Fake Rescue content identified and has been specifically highlighted in the past by animal welfare organizations. [28,29]

A video that had garnered 6,500 views shows two raptors, identified as a crested hawk-eagle and a barn owl, and a reticulated python in one frame. Barn owls are nocturnal raptors that roost and nest in hollow logs, caves or old farm buildings, to give them shelter and isolation. [30,31] It is therefore unlikely to see an owl within an exposed and shallow burrow, contrary to their natural preference. Also, it is unlikely the owl and the eagle would be present together since they are typically active at different times - the crested hawk-eagle is a diurnal raptor, unlike the nocturnal barn owl. Both species might share the same dietary preferences, but their different active times reduce the chance of food competition and hence interaction. The fact that diurnal raptor species typically spend time perching in high trees or soaring in the sky makes it even more unlikely that the hawk-eagle would be found in a burrow on the ground. [32]

The images below further indicate that this video was made for entertainment purposes and the snake involved is actually held captive. They show both the owl and snake being taken away by the creators, then the snake is put down a few meters away from the burrow and the owl is returned to their original place. Our further research discovered that there were more videos uploaded with similar titles depicting similar scenarios involving different species.



An owl that was perching inside a burrow was approached by a python. A few moments later two men came along to take away both the owl and the snake. Image 4 shows a disclaimer of the video that it was intentionally intended for entertainment purposes and that the snake is their pet.

SMACC ID: recPVhXfQQWMO9QM5

Baby monkeys and other animals are deliberately placed in frightening and dangerous situations from which they cannot escape. The animals experience great pain and distress. The people film these animals, pretending to 'rescue' them, and post the videos on social media platforms for online engagement, and in order to elicit donations. Not only is this practice incredibly cruel, it is fraudulent. Social media companies have a moral and legal obligation to identify and remove such content.

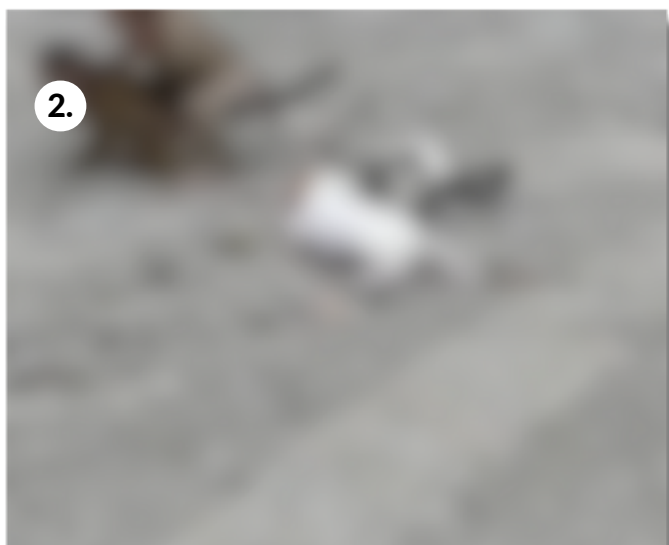


Nedim C Buyukmihci, V.M.D., Co-founder and Veterinary Advisor, Action for Primates; Emeritus Professor of Veterinary Medicine

One video posted to Facebook, with over seven million views at the time of recording, shows kittens in a dirt cave with a snake wrapped around them. A person comes in and “rescues” the two kittens. In a similar video posted to Facebook with over 100,000 views, a puppy and a monkey are attacked by a snake while someone films, failing to intervene for over eight minutes.



Two kittens are being “rescued” from a snake. SMACC ID: recEgs9V0xu3Zjsnm



Screenshots from a video depicting baby monkeys and a puppy along with a snake. In image 2, the puppy and snake have been thrown towards the monkeys. Image 3 shows two comments from viewers, the first apparently encouraging the scenario, the second criticizing the person who ‘threw’ the puppy. SMACC ID: recflbwTaY6J8lpc7



Fake Rescue scenario where a snake wraps around another animal and seconds later is removed by the human rescuer. SMACC ID: recs0nJwTXGLypF74 and recVYnjklcpNQM2P1

Another form of staged attack content features dogs attacking baby monkeys. In one video posted to Facebook with nearly 70,000 views, a dog attacks two baby monkeys and drags one by the neck. Similar to the fake medical treatment of baby macaques, these videos are enjoyed by “monkey haters” who celebrate torture in the comments. Some videos show baby monkeys being attacked by crabs. These videos always follow the same format of a monkey sitting in mud, with the crab/s attached to the monkey’s body, while a person tries and fails to remove the crabs with a stick.

In all situations, the animals under attack are under significant stress. **Researchers have stated that “one of the most acute stresses that an animal can experience is the threat of immediate physical injury or death due to attack by competitors or predators.”**[33] Even if animals are extricated from these situations alive, the potential for physical injury and psychological trauma is high. Boa constrictors squeeze their prey to restrict blood flow, leading to suffocation.[34] Animals subjected to such attacks are likely to sustain internal injuries to organs or damaged ribs.[35]

The predators themselves are also at risk. Attacks are energy-consuming and failure to secure their prey means that they are not rewarded with a meal.[36] They are placed at significant risk of injury from the other animal fighting back and from rough handling by the intervening human. As noted by World Animal Protection, “During the filming itself, the “predators” are shown being bitten, pecked, scratched and otherwise injured by the “prey” as well as prodded with sticks and otherwise roughly handled by the human during the ‘rescue’”.[37]

“ Similar to the fake medical treatment of baby macaques, these [animal attack] videos are enjoyed by “monkey haters” who celebrate torture in the comments.

MEDICAL TREATMENT

This type of content made up 9.9% of our data, featuring animals who have clear injuries or illness that require medical treatment. A person is filmed administering treatment, usually with bandages or by applying some form of ointment or injectable. Such content is tricky to identify as fake, and often requires a trained expert to determine.

However, there are some general indicators most viewers can look out for. Often, the person administering treatment is clearly not in a medical setting, is not wearing gloves or other protective equipment, or does not appear to be a medical or veterinary professional. The animal may be handled roughly by the person administering the treatment and in clear distress.

Veterinary reviews have identified those in the content carrying out various incorrect or inappropriate treatments. These include:

- 1. Administering vaccinations to unconscious animals.** Administering vaccines to unconscious animals is not a standard practice in veterinary medicine. Vaccines are typically given to conscious animals after a thorough examination by a veterinarian to ensure they are healthy and appropriate candidates for vaccination. Administering vaccines to unconscious animals can pose several risks, including the possibility of adverse reactions and the inability to monitor the animal's response to the vaccine.
- 2. Incorrectly placed IV lines,** which can lead to complications and ineffective treatment.
- 3. Feeding animals milk or wet food with a syringe while they are nasally intubated,** which can cause aspiration and pose a significant risk to the animal's health.

These practices demonstrate a lack of adherence to proper veterinary protocols and standards and suggest that the treatments are staged.

In one video posted to Facebook with 128,000 views, a cat lays motionless with their eyes shut and is then seen in an unidentifiable room receiving an injection and IV treatment by someone who is only seen from behind or in close-ups showing their hands. Veterinary assessment of the video stated the following:

- 1. Air Bubble in IV Line:** An air bubble in an IV line can be extremely dangerous, potentially causing an air embolism if it enters the bloodstream.
- 2. Butterfly Catheter Usage:** Butterfly catheters are rarely used for IV lines. They are typically used for blood sampling or collection, not for fluid administration.
- 3. Fluid Administration Speed:** The fluid appears to be administered very quickly, which is concerning. This rapid rate doesn't make sense, especially since the animal is unconscious and it's a kitten, which requires careful and controlled fluid administration.

These issues raise doubts about the authenticity of the procedures shown in the video.



A kitten laying down with an IV line inserted in one of their legs. The screenshot shows the air bubble in the IV line and the use of a butterfly catheter. SMACC ID: recc2jO8zZeyzRCQD

In another video, the supposed vet claims to test a stray cat for rabies after she was rescued. Upon viewing the content, a veterinarian stated:

Confirming rabies in a cat usually involves testing its brain tissue, which can only be done posthumously. If the cat has bitten someone and is alive, it's quarantined for about ten days to watch for signs of rabies. If it stays healthy during this time, it's unlikely to have transmitted rabies through the bite. So, confirming rabies typically requires more than one visit to the vet. Also at 3:26, administering oral medication to an unconscious cat, especially without proper precautions, suggests the video might not involve a trained veterinary professional.

“ Often, the person administering treatment is clearly not in a medical setting, is not wearing gloves or other protective equipment, or does not appear to be a medical or veterinary professional. The animal may be handled roughly by the person administering the treatment and in clear distress.



A cat being given oral medication when the cat does not appear to be conscious.

Baby monkeys appear frequently in this type of content. Such videos attract a specific group of people (dubbed “monkey haters”) who enjoy watching the torture of baby macaques.[7] In a video posted on Facebook with over 1,000 views, a sick monkey is given an unidentified fluid through a syringe, and a person presses on their chest repeatedly as the monkey remains motionless. Comments include “successfully tortured to death!!”, “Looks like a drug or alcohol overdose” and “Whatever! U killed the poor thing deal with it u sick individuals.”



Baby monkey in a diaper is given an unidentified fluid through a syringe.
SMACC ID: rec0spNclx5Ezee98

DROWNED

Over 4% of Fake Rescue content features animals unable to escape from bodies of water - usually man-made canals or drains, swimming desperately to avoid sinking and drowning. The struggling animals are typically filmed for a prolonged time, a clear sign of a fake scenario, after which rescue is attempted.

One video shows a cat stuck in water, with the banks too high for them to climb out. A veterinarian who reviewed the video stated that the rescue appeared fake, as the rescuer claims to have “come across” the cat, but was ready with a towel. They stated that the cat was at risk of “stress, swallowing water, undercooling, permanent trauma and damaged lungs”.



Screenshots of scenes from a video in chronological order. The kitten is trying to keep her head on top of the water (Image 1), and is then seen trying to climb the wall, only to fall back down again. They are then “rescued” by a woman (Image 2) and dried with a prepared towel (Image 3 and 4). After that the kitten is brought to a home. SMACC ID: recNcCbHHLc6mnEEd

Public comments on the video also questioned the authenticity of the rescue, with one user stating, “Why is there a camera on the struggling kitten for so long and at just the right angle and position? Shame on you for putting the kitten through that just for some views!” In this example, the cat is filmed struggling for 31 seconds before someone attempts rescue. **Thirty-one seconds is a considerable amount of time to watch an animal in a state of panic and distress before attempting a rescue, during which they may drown.**

Monkeys often also feature in these videos, seen clinging to a branch or wooden poles positioned away from the water’s edge.

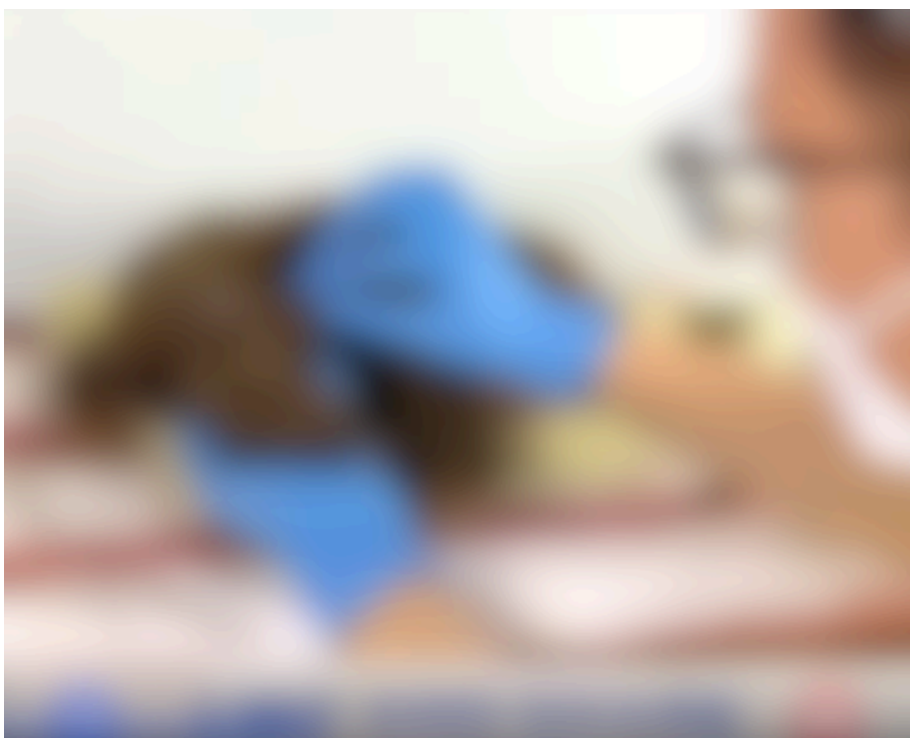
UNNATURAL INFESTATION OF ORGANISMS

Another form of Fake Rescue content features animals with apparent infestations of external parasites such as ticks, comprising almost 4% of the videos in our data set. The content shows the rescuer manually removing the parasites, usually using tweezers. These videos are immensely popular, with entire channels dedicated to them, posting video after video of severe “tick infestations” and removal.

In some cases, the “ticks” are actually objects such as seeds or beans that have been attached to the animal’s body, with the rescuer pulling them off using tweezers. In one Facebook video, a person removes dozens of fake ticks from a dog. Comments from our veterinarians included:

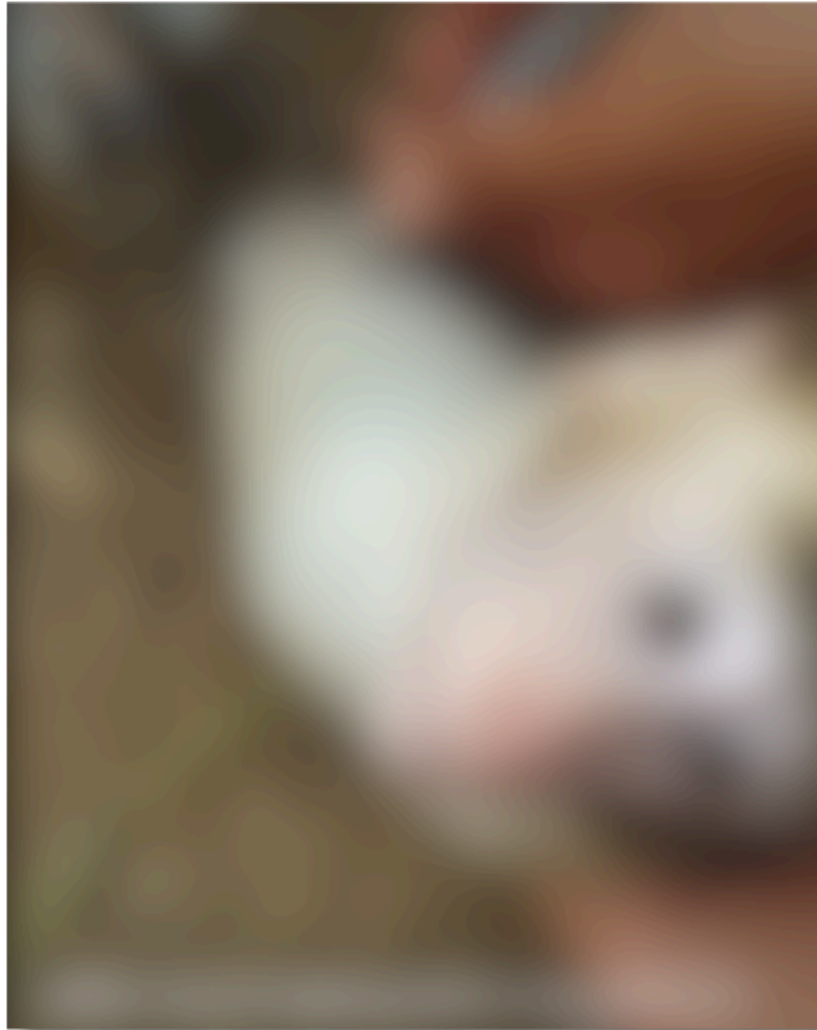
Any dog that was truly covered in this many engorged adult ticks would be extremely malnourished. Ticks very rarely attach in such "convenient" locations to be removed, they usually attached around paws, ears or muzzles - where there are folds in the skin or the dog is rooting through long grass, very rarely across their dorsum as shown here.

SMACC identified some videos showing fake ticks being removed from the genitals of young monkeys with pliers.



“Tick” infestation of a puppy discovered by the “rescuer”. Two men are shown lifting up a drain cover on road and lifting out a dog. The dog has beans stuck on fur to appear like “ticks”. The dog is taken to a “vet” who uses tweezers to remove the beans, which also removes tufts of fur.

SMACC ID: recU7r0EJJgtN4dun



"Tick" infestation around the monkey's genitals being removed. The "ticks" appear to actually be sunflower seeds. This is just one of multiple similar videos in the data collected by SMACC researchers. The monkeys can be seen wincing in pain as the seeds as pulled with the tweezers. SMACC ID: recsTfjDJGNbbQPB2

Similarly, other content focuses on the removal of barnacles and other marine life from the carapaces of marine turtles. Barnacles do naturally attach themselves to turtles in this way, to get the benefit of moving water, as they are filter feeders, and generally do not cause damage to the individual. However, a large barnacle load can have health implications for the turtle or may indicate underlying health conditions.[38] In multiple videos posted across Facebook and YouTube, turtles are "found" covered in barnacles, which are then shaved off their shells, usually using a knife and potentially harming the animal in the removal process. It's likely that fake barnacles and algae are glued to turtles' shells for the sake of these videos and scraped off. Turtles have nerve endings in their shells, and so this is likely to be painful.[39]

Further, many of the turtles featured in these videos appear to be freshwater turtles, while barnacles are marine organisms, exclusively found in saltwater environments. This not only confirms that such content is not genuine, but also presents further risk to the turtles' health, as they are not suited to the marine environment.



Barnacle removal from the shells of freshwater turtles. These species would not live in a marine environment with barnacles, so they must be glued on by the content creator.

SMACC ID: recJ71QyHpha7fYYk and recJ71QyHpha7fYYk

Another variation on this theme features the removal of what appear to be small snakes from the ears of monkeys or dogs with tweezers or pliers. In one example, the technique for attempted removal is poor, as the person “fails” to grasp the snake with the tweezers.

It is clear that they are intentionally delaying the removal of the snake, by pretending to struggle to remove it, in order to prolong the situation for the camera. In one video, this is filmed for 12 minutes.



These two screenshots are from two different videos - one from Facebook and the other from Instagram. Both show a macaque with a small snake-like reptile in their ear. They are struggling whilst being held down as a person with tweezers appears to pretend to try to remove the snake.

SMACC ID: recdc1FgyE5Jg3tdw and recqCp5nSP4r7SC4U

Interestingly, there is similar content featuring the removal of fake ticks from humans, demonstrating that this form of content has a definite audience. This content may appeal to people who enjoy watching other content normally seen as unpleasant, such as pimple popping, or other medical procedures.[40]

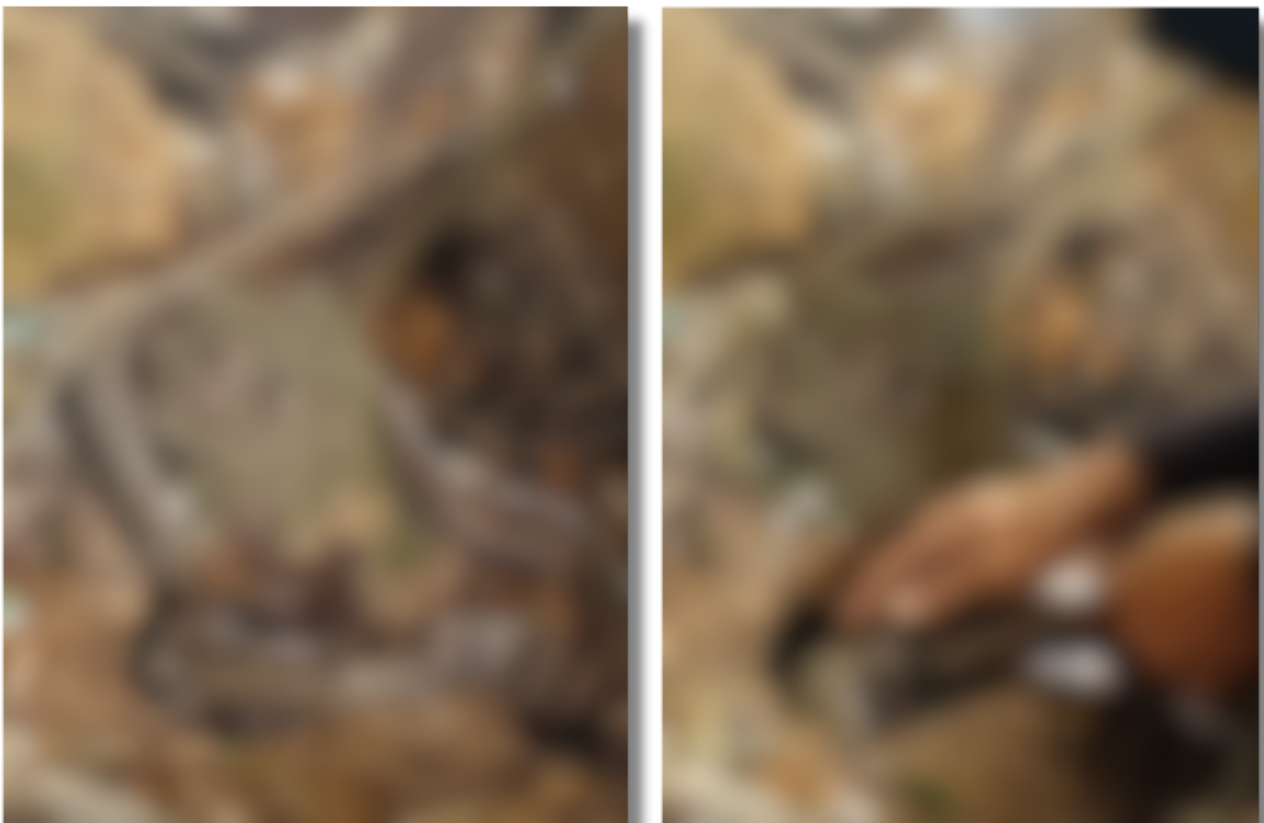
BURIED

Animals were seen buried in the ground in sand or mud in 2.6% of the data. Often, the body is completely buried and the head of the animal is above the ground. This in itself raises questions about how the animals came to be in such a situation, only to be happened upon by a “rescuer”.

The description of one of these videos by our volunteers reads:

“The tail of the monkey is all I can see. The animal is stuck under a heap of mud. Around the mud [are] two curled-up snakes. The monkey is screaming for help. The abuser can be seen using a stick to appear to be removing the mud but of course he is pretending, as the monkey remains under the mud and I am surprised if [they] can breathe. At the moment that I am watching the video [they] still scream.”

Examination of the creator’s account reveals a whole range of videos showing the macaques trapped, buried and being attacked by other animals.

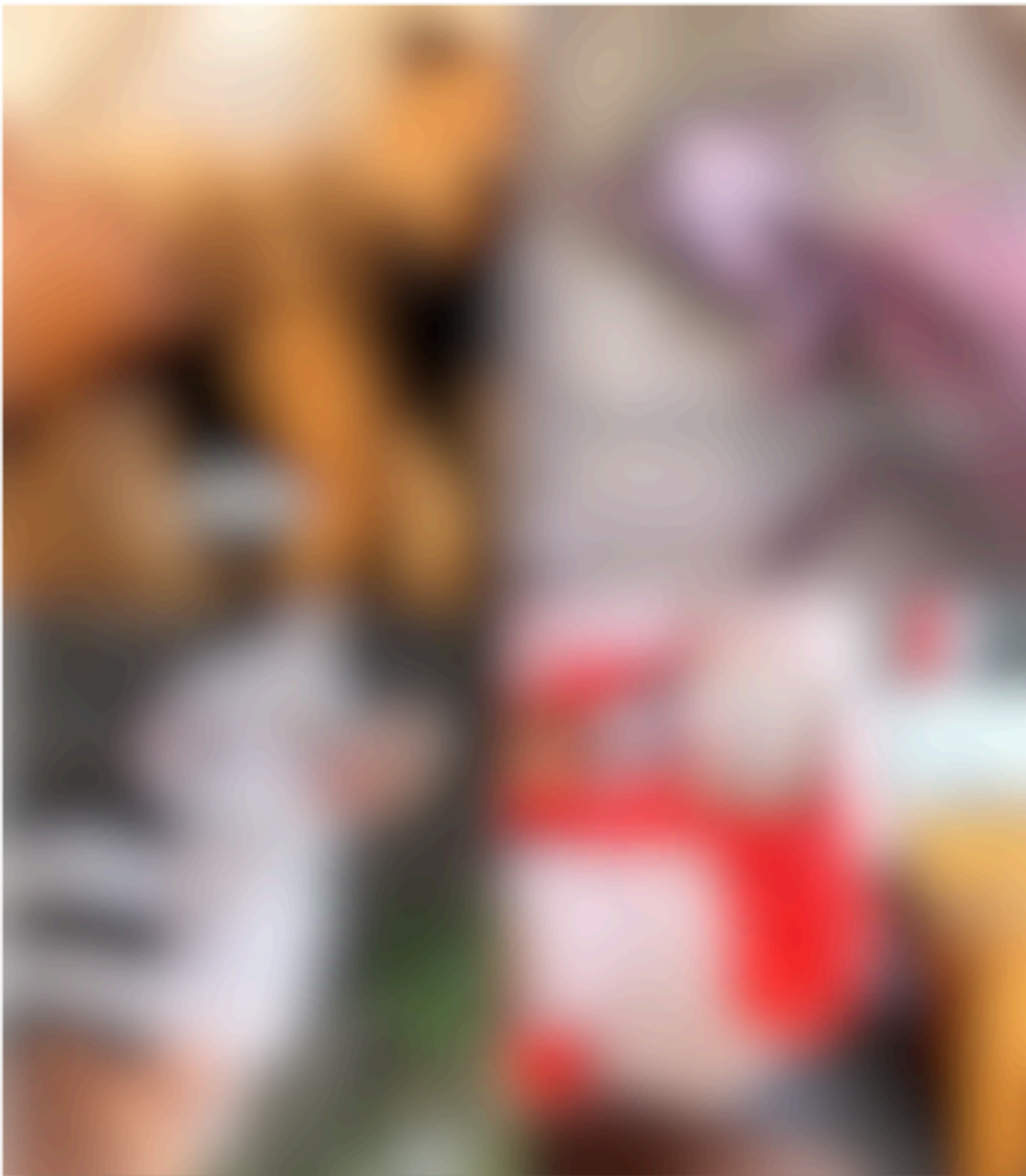


Images from the same video that shows a monkey being buried and wrapped by a snake.

SMACC ID: [recmSFjYCdy2pmV5x](#)

RESUSCITATED

Some content shows animals that are receiving CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), as though the animal needs to be revived. The animal is clearly still breathing, conscious and alert, negating the need for CPR. The UK veterinary charity PDSA (the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals) advises that CPR should never be performed on an alert or healthy dog whose heart is still beating, even if they are not conscious "as it could seriously hurt or even kill them." [41] In humans, the risks of CPR are well documented and include "damage to internal organs and rib fractures, and adverse clinical outcomes for the patient such as hypoxic brain damage or increased physical disability." [42] Puppies and baby animals have soft bones, increasing the risk of broken ribs during chest compressions. It is clear that CPR should only ever be used when absolutely necessary.



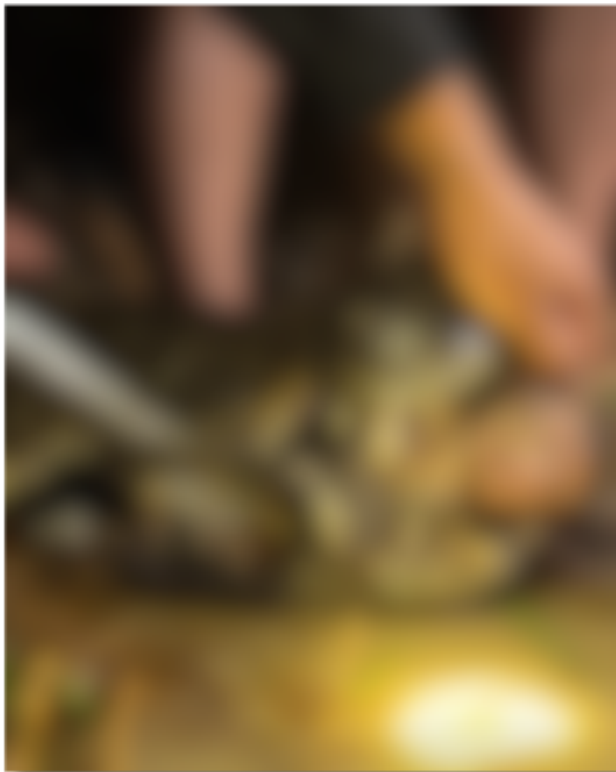
Resuscitation being performed on different species. Poor technique is used and some of the animals are clearly breathing.

SMACC ID: recWQDBHCPQRljRed, rec1OqTs8yWBcl5a4, recUbyC1kpfaVkFCq, recFiFwX6eXZmlsp5

RESCUED FROM AN IMPLAUSIBLE SITUATION

This theme was used for content depicting a scenario that would be very unlikely to occur in real life or was very clearly fake. This type of Fake Rescue made up almost 0.5% of our data. Most of these used fake predators such as crocodilians to depict rescues involving live prey animals such as monkeys.[43]

Whilst the prey animal is less likely to be harmed, the situation is still very stressful to the animals subjected to this, as they may not be able to discern real versus fake predators, and because they have been placed in the situation against their will.



A macaque is trapped inside a crocodilian-looking toy's mouth. The "rescuers" are trying to open the mouth with a tool, but seem to be intentionally being slow and failing, presumably so they can continue to film for a longer period. The macaque is visibly distressed and trying to get out. SMACC ID: recOTRb2F1CR7TfKb

Intentionally putting animals at risk to simulate a rescue is beyond shameful. Such acts highlight the depravity of some content creators who exploit animals to ramp up likes and gain followers. Animals are not props. They do not know whether they will be saved and experience all the same emotions, stress, and thoughts as if this were a true life-or-death situation. Social media users have the power to help change this narrative. This detailed report provides the necessary tools to spot these fake rescues and steps to take a stand for these vulnerable animals.

Adam Parascandola, Vice President, Animal Rescue Team, Humane Society International



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**

OTHER THEMES

A selection of other potential themes also exists, but in much lower numbers. These include videos where animals have been purchased from a captive situation, such as someone selling them as pets from their home, or purchasing them from a dog meat vendor, which is portrayed as an act of rescue. Buying animals in order to “rescue” them is not recommended by animal protection organizations.[44,45] Buying the animal may remove that individual from the negative situation they are in, but the money paid may be used to obtain further animals or can encourage poaching from the wild, in order to continue the trade. So more animals will be subjected to poor welfare conditions in the pet trade, where the possibility of experiencing suffocation, sickness and other various forms of trauma and suffering is high.[46]

Some content shows humans interfering with animals in the wild. They often feature animals who are picked up and relocated to a different area, with the claim that this is necessary for the animals’ safety. In a 15 minute-long video, a box turtle is dug up from their burrow in the ground and brought to a water source.

The video’s captions assert that the turtle needed rescuing. A veterinarian reviewing this content stated that:

Box turtles bury on loam naturally. No need for them to be relocated or "rescued" to another place. If for whatever reason that was a dangerous area and they wanted to move it, they staged the whole thing to make it a long documentary of 15 minutes of the person handling the animal.

Another veterinarian stated:

The turtle was being handled inappropriately - being on its back is harmful and makes it so it is hard for them to breathe. It also affects their blood pressure. Being handled roughly causes stress and distress as well.

“ Another similar situation is the use of nearly dying or already dead animals as props for content. Most of these types of videos have baby monkeys as the main attraction. Most such baby monkeys appear pale and unable to move. However, no immediate rescue action is taken.



*A turtle being inappropriately held, upside down, by a “rescuer” during a Fake Rescue.
SMACC ID: recFebWnXtijHOZJy*

Another similar situation is the use of nearly dying or already dead animals as props for content. Most of these types of videos have baby monkeys as the main attraction. Most of these baby monkeys appear pale and unable to move. However, no immediate rescue action is taken. Not only does this inappropriately prolong the death of the animals involved, but depicting a dead animal in order to gain social media followers is clearly unethical.



A macaque is stuck between two branches, with what seems to be a fresh injury on their head and face clear by the bleeding. The macaque does not move at all, and appears to be dead. A spectator can be seen at the back of the monkey. The caption uses a keyword commonly used by those who create monkey hatred content (redacted).

SMACC ID: recE8z366Utf0arHB



6. FAKE RESCUE INDICATORS

“

A really important approach to assessing any animal and human interaction is to think critically about the situation. This includes considering why the animal is in the situation in the first place, and if it would be a likely occurrence.

”

FAKE RESCUE INDICATORS

Identifying Fake Rescue content can be a challenge as such content can be very convincing to viewers. Therefore, a really important part of SMACC's research was to identify key indicators that can be used to determine whether or not rescue content is genuine.

What is clear is that in order to make a confident assessment, multiple indicators must be considered together. This is especially true as some of these indicators are not exclusive to Fake Rescue but may also appear in genuine rescue content, so they need to be considered as part of the bigger picture.

Our researchers indicated the prevalence of each indicator of Fake Rescue. However, it is also important to consider the specificity of each indicator, to determine how reliable the indicator may be. There are some indicators that are common, for example, "Clear editing of video", although this does not mean it alone is a strong indicator of Fake Rescue, as this indicator is also common in genuine rescue videos. Alternatively, an indicator such as "Medical facilities appear to be fake" may be less common, but is much more likely to be a strong indicator of the overall rescue being fake. It is the combination of indicators that is important.

AUTHENTICITY

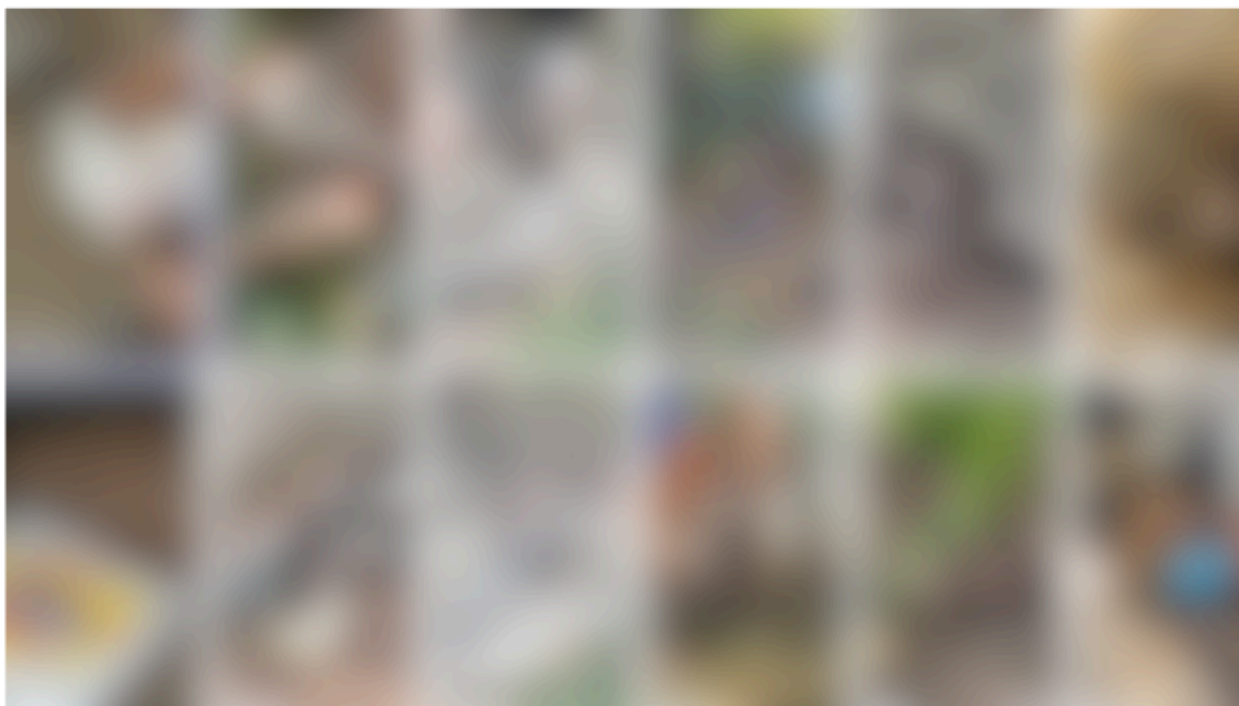
NO GENUINE ANIMAL ORGANIZATION ASSOCIATED

One key piece of information that SMACC looks for when assessing videos portraying the rescue of animals is whether the content creator appears to be an authentic animal advocate, or is linked to any such organization. This involves the assessment of the creator's whole account/channel. If indeed a genuine animal organization is involved, then the content cannot be a Fake Rescue. Therefore, 100% of the content in our data set was subject to this indicator.

This is assessed by looking for links to a formal organization website or references to an official organization or charity registration. The lack of content on the account showing other aspects of the organization or the other ways in which they care for animals can reaffirm this. If a creator claims to be an independent rescuer, they genuinely may not have this information, but we would expect to find an explanation of the history, what they do, who they are or other details. Looking for this information should be standard practice for anyone engaging with an animal rescue, to make sure the animals are receiving the best care possible by a competent person, especially if considering making a donation.

PAGE/ACCOUNT HAS MULTIPLE FAKE RESCUES OR SIMILAR POSTS

Accounts sharing Fake Rescue content tend to feature a number of similar videos. Therefore checking the variety of content shared by the account is key. If there appears to be mostly videos showing animals in suspicious situations and very little follow up on the animals, the rescuer/organization or wider animal issues, this could be an indication it is fake. This was true in 88.6% of SMACC's data.



An account on Facebook showing almost exclusively Fake Rescue content in their "reels". We suspect that the same animals are used in multiple videos by the creator, of which there were 192 at the time of reporting.

SMACC's researchers were also able to identify the same or very similar looking videos being shared on multiple accounts. On some accounts, we see content with similar or identical situations or some even using the same animals (e.g. one rescue of a cat, another of a puppy, both being stuck in the same situation at different times). It is of course extremely unlikely that the same animal would need rescuing multiple times, or that one person should repeatedly happen upon animals in need.

If a viewer confirms one video is fake on a certain account, then it can be a good indication that other content on that account is also fake.

“ A really important approach to assessing any animal and human interaction is to think critically about the situation. This includes considering why the animal is in the situation in the first place, and if it would be a likely occurrence.

FOLLOW-UP INFORMATION

Almost 80% of the content we examined did not include follow-up information on the well-being of the animal that was rescued. This would be expected if the page was run by a genuine rescuer, who would usually show the animal still in rescue, released into the wild or even in a new home, depending on the species and circumstance. This is of particular interest if a viewer is considering making a donation to the creator, as follow-up content can reassure donors that their money is actually being used to help animals in need. Some creators appear to be attempting to address this, with some footage of the animals looking healthier, but no further information shared. The fate of these animals is completely unknown and is deeply concerning for animal advocates.

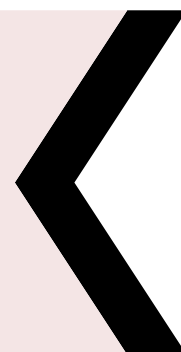
PROFESSIONALISM OF CONDUCT

In 49.3% of instances, the persons shown were not carrying or using appropriate or professional rescue equipment. The rescuers appear in regular clothing, rather than identifying clothing of an organization, or their faces may not even appear on screen. The medical facilities or the area in which the animal is receiving apparent treatment does not appear official or fit for purpose. Areas may appear unclean, or have a lack of medical equipment or tools, and the veterinarian's face is not shown. **Sometimes wider shots of the room or “veterinary clinic” are not shown at all, as though the creator is intentionally hiding the location.**

THE HUMAN RESCUER IS ALWAYS THE SAME PERSON

On accounts which share a lot of Fake Rescue content, often the person shown carrying out the rescue is the same person. This of course may be true in genuine rescues, where a person's job is to rescue animals. However, if the channel is not legitimate, or the narrative of the content is that the person has randomly come across an animal in need, it raises suspicion if the person is always the same. It is extremely unlikely that the same person would be in that situation multiple times. In 26.8% of the data, the person shown in the video was identified as the same person in multiple Fake Rescue videos. If the person's face is not visible, clothing can confirm this.

“Accounts sharing Fake Rescue content tend to feature a number of similar videos. Therefore checking the variety of content shared by the account is key.”



REALITY CHECK

UNLIKELY TO BE A RANDOM ENCOUNTER CAUGHT ON CAMERA

A really important approach to assessing any animal and human interaction is to think critically about the situation. This includes considering why the animal is in the situation in the first place, and if it would be a likely occurrence.

Our researchers did not always believe the scenario shown in the content was likely to be a random encounter caught on camera. This was especially true for content that showed the creator apparently finding animals in need of rescue by chance. This narrative is sometimes very clearly disingenuous when the person in the content is seen walking along and then suddenly happens upon or randomly spots an animal in need. It is unclear why creators would have already been filming, directly before they came across the animals, so it is very likely that they had been filming as they knew the animals were there. These creators may have multiple videos of such “random” encounters, which is of course extremely unlikely. 80.8% of the links collated had this indicator.

For example, numerous videos show puppies inside tied up plastic bags, inside bins or in piles of rubbish. The creators film themselves walking along and overhearing the cries of the puppies.



A puppy found inside a garbage bag among other trash. When the bag is opened the puppy is panting in distress. The creator delays assisting the animal to film the situation, there is no formal organization involved and the creator was filming before they happened upon the animal, which shows it is staged.
SMACC ID: recqvlhiiTIWOVzzw

THE SAME ANIMAL/S APPEAR IN MULTIPLE CONTENT

Tragically, some animals are used repeatedly in Fake Rescue videos. It is extremely unlikely that the same animal would need rescuing multiple times. In order to make a number of videos, the creators will repeatedly subject the animal to dangerous situations, willing to risk their lives for social media content. It can be difficult to identify the same animal, but clues such as size, coloration or patterns on their fur or skin can help.

CONTENT CREATION

CREATOR DELAYS ASSISTING THE ANIMAL TO FILM THE SITUATION

Almost 68% of the data contained the indicator “Creator delays assisting the animal to film the situation”. In this content, animals were left in danger sometimes for several minutes, whilst the creator films them. This does not meet the definition of rescue, if they allow the animal to continue suffering. It often appears that capturing the situation on camera is prioritized over the actual rescue of the animal. The ResQ Charitable Trust reflects on this:

In some cases, especially with wildlife, it becomes very tempting for all the stakeholders involved, to handle the rescued animal for purposes such as photography and assessment. However, an efficient rescuer must circumvent this for the safety of the animal.[47]

The efforts of the person trying to rescue the animal can appear to be intentionally unsuccessful, presumably so they can film the situation for longer. This may be a person pretending to wedge a stick between the body of a snake and the monkey the snake is wrapped around, but using very little force or effort to actually be effective.

A video on TikTok shows a kitten with a rusty, metal pipe stuck tightly around their stomach. The person films the struggling kitten on the ground, and even picks them up and turns them around to show how they are stuck. It takes the person over one minute to start to assist the cat, which they struggle to do with one hand while also holding the phone for filming. When we explored this account further, we found the creator has many very similar videos of animals, usually cats and dogs, trapped inside objects.

Some videos may mention animal rescue in the title but the entire video simply shows the animals frantically struggling. For example, a young macaque is filmed stuck in a fence with a snake wrapped around them. The video is over three minutes long and the creator simply films the panicking macaque without intervening. As no rescue takes place this may not qualify as true Fake Rescue content, but the creator tries to imply it by using words such as, “Watch to the end to see the result!” and using rescue related hashtags.



A kitten trapped inside a rusty metal pipe. As they cry for help, the creator picks them up and proceeds to turn them around in mid-air, in order to film the suffering kitten from all angles. This video was found on multiple Fake Rescue accounts. SMACC ID: recqvlhiiTIWOVzzw

CLEAR EDITING OF VIDEOS AND MULTIPLE CAMERA ANGLES

The narrative of many Fake Rescue videos is that the person creating the content has unexpectedly come across an animal in need of rescue. Therefore, in these videos we could expect their footage to be from the creator's perspective, holding the camera in front of their face, usually a smartphone, likely with lots of movement of the camera. However, we see many Fake Rescue videos which appear to be very professionally made, 62.2% showing clear editing by the creator, indicating that they have carefully planned what they want to film in advance. Typically, the content will have numerous "shots" or scenes, where we see different stages of the rescue. The scenario will be filmed from multiple camera angles, which would not be possible in one take on a phone. All of this takes time to capture on film before the animal is assisted, when a genuine rescuer would prioritize assisting the animal over filming the encounter. SMACC member organization, Welttierschutzgesellschaft, noted "A professional video that shows the full rescue in perfect setting and quality – from finding the animal, rescuing it, caring for it – is almost impossible. We always prioritize the rescue of the animal instead of the perfect camera setting and full content. Therefore, it is one of the strongest indicators of Fake Rescues if the video seems to be too professional and 'perfect'."

It is true that genuine rescues may share professional content that is edited, however this is usually true of rescues where the organization has been notified in advance, and there are additional team members able to attend the scene to focus purely on documenting what is taking place. The active rescue of the animal will always be shown first, and undertaken as quickly as is possible.

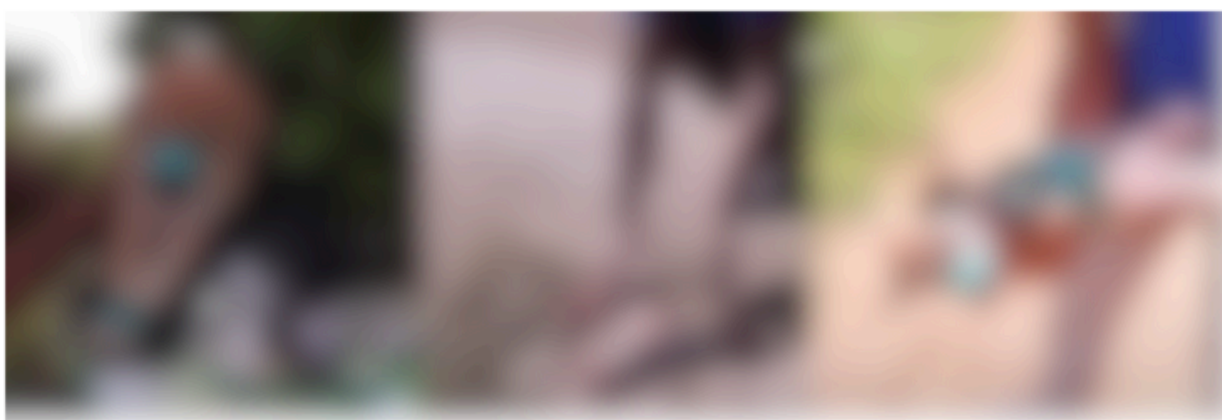
CASE STUDY: SMACC

Analyzing Fake Rescue Content

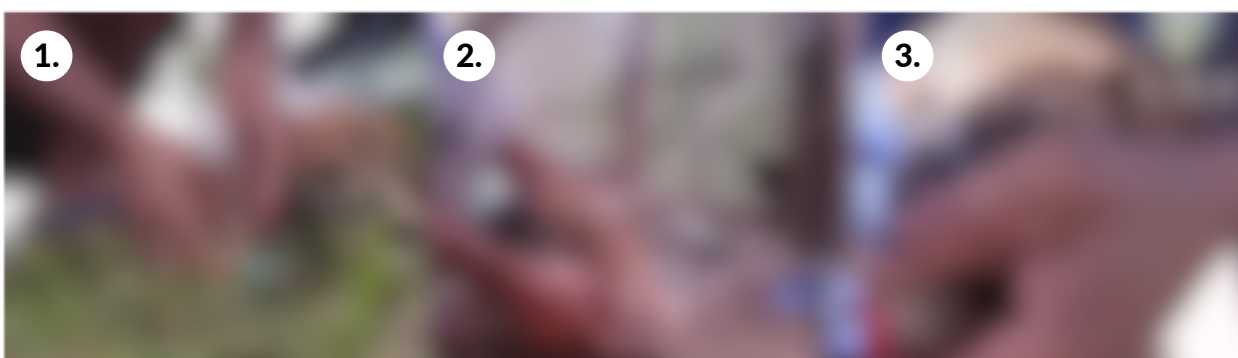
Platform: Facebook

Despite the very similar-looking situation, these screenshots were compiled from different videos on the same account. Multiple signs of Fake Rescue can be seen:

- similar-looking dogs;
- similar types of abuse and methods;
- and seemingly, based on the attire and skin tone, the same man.



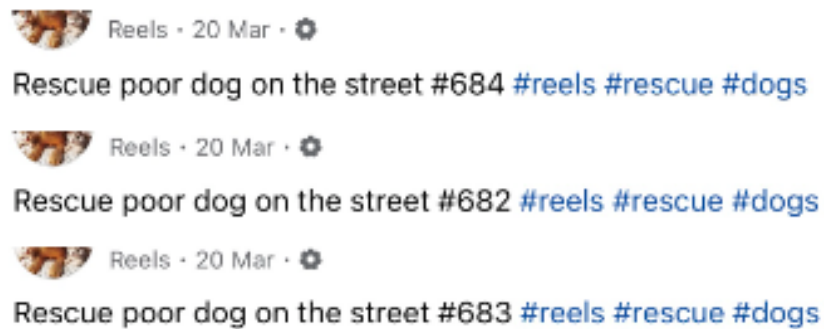
Screenshots from three different videos, on the same account, depicting puppies with tape around their muzzles, legs and bodies.. The videos were also uploaded on the same day.



Screenshots showing three very similar puppies with a white pattern on top of their snout, in different videos on the same account. Images 1 and 3 show the puppy with tape around its legs, while Image 2 shows what appears to be the same puppy with a noose around its neck. All videos were uploaded on the same day, making it very likely that the same puppy has been placed in both these scenarios simply to be filmed for content.



Screenshots showing three very similar brown colored puppies with a white pattern on top of their snout, in different videos on the same account. Image 1 and Image 3 depict the puppy with a padlocked chain around its neck. Image 2 depicts the puppy on a tree trunk in what appears to be a pool of water. All videos were uploaded on the same day, again strongly indicating that the creator had used the same puppy to make the content.



Captions indicating the number of “rescue” videos uploaded by a single creator.

Each piece of content has the same caption format as shown above and similar style of story. The account frequently uploads multiple videos in a day, which suggests there are numerous puppies being abused.

Interestingly, the account stopped uploading Fake Rescue content in November 2023 and started uploading what seemed to be content of the same puppies from their Fake Rescue videos (light brown puppies) that have grown up. Although this might appear to negate our ‘no follow-up’ indicator, the account was positive for a number of other indicators that we have listed (e.g. “Account posts multiple similar content” and “The same animals are used in different videos”). The videos of the grown-up puppies were uploaded five months after the original Fake Rescue videos with no explanation of the condition and the long-term plan for them. Rather than seeing these as follow-up videos, the videos can be seen as proof that the puppies were under the custody of the account owner who has intentionally exposed the puppies to innumerable acts of cruelty for the sake of videos.



Images from the latest videos of puppies from the same account as above, as of March 2024. The older puppy appears to be the same puppy we have seen previously, suggesting that the creator has custody of the dogs used in the Fake Rescue videos.

The online depiction of “fake rescues”, where animals are deliberately placed in dangerous or cruel situations to be filmed and ‘rescued’ by the perpetrator for the sake of generating online content, associated ‘likes’ and in some cases for financial donations, is particularly distressing, relying as it does on the naivety and good nature of the viewers. “Spot the Scam: Unmasking Fake Animal Rescues” exposes the scale of this issue and the extreme suffering and distress inflicted on the affected animals, who are often repeatedly abused for the purpose. This detailed and sobering report must act as a long-overdue wake-up call for social media platforms to ensure such content is identified and taken down without delay, in order to disincentivise the perpetrators from creating such vile content.



Dr Mark Jones, Head of Policy, Born Free Foundation



7. REGULATIONS

“

Fake Rescue content is still being posted on these platforms and viewership is still high. It is clear from the results that these animal welfare policies are not being enforced adequately by moderation teams at the platforms.

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SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The majority of Fake Rescue content was found on Facebook (47.7%), followed by TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter/X (see Figure 3). This is consistent with SMACC's previous findings of data analyzed for other reports. **Facebook has consistently been the platform with the highest volume of cruelty content, indicating an ongoing and significant problem with the platform.**[48] This may be why it is so often used by those creating and sharing Fake Rescue content, as they may believe they have a good chance of their content not being removed. The company Meta owns Facebook and Instagram, so overall, 51.9% of content was found on their platforms. This is a significant outcome given that Meta released a new policy in early 2023, prohibiting fake or staged rescue content on its platforms. **The findings in this report show that this policy is not being enforced effectively.**[49]

When looking specifically at total views per platform, TikTok has the highest number (278,773,973 - two hundred and seventy-eight million). This may be due to its interactive nature and its short video format, which is appealing to the younger generations, who typically spend significant time on the internet.[50] Once a short video ends, it automatically replays, which helps to generate more views systematically.[51]

Social media platforms use algorithms to manage which content a viewer sees, largely influenced by similar content that the user has engaged with previously. The engagement can be in the form of likes, comments, shares, location, video information and other tools provided by the application. TikTok does not have a policy specifically against Fake Rescue content, but does prohibit content "abusing animals" and "staged animal fighting".[52] After consultation with SMACC, the platform also published a new Animal Welfare Safety Centre on their website in early 2024, which educates users on animal welfare, and which also mentions "Absence of proper medical care when there's evidence of injury" as an indicator of animal abuse.[53]

In March 2021, YouTube updated their policy to prohibit "content that shows animal rescue that is staged and puts the animal in harmful scenarios".[54] Around this time, YouTube was subject to public pressure from animal protection NGOs, who released reports about the availability of Fake Rescue content on the platform, specifically those showing prey/predator fights, which may have influenced the change in policy.[37,56]

Fake Rescue is a very specific form of animal cruelty that sometimes might not be associated with clear signs of abuse, such as direct violence to the animals. Both Meta and YouTube made a conscious choice to include Fake Rescue as a type of content that is prohibited, and also to clearly emphasize the terms "fake/staged rescue", as a separate point of action, 'rather than incorporate them into broader animal welfare-related community guidelines. This indicates that both of these platforms are highly aware of the

issues that surround Fake Rescue content, and including this regulation was a significant step in their effort to combat the issue.

However, despite these animal welfare policies, Fake Rescue content is still being posted on these platforms and viewership is still high. It is clear from the results that these policies are not being enforced adequately by moderation teams at the platforms. This may be in part due to the evolving variety of Fake Rescue content that now exists, which would not be covered by “staged animal fights” alone. This highlights the absolutely crucial need for platforms to continue to monitor and develop their policies and moderation, in order to keep on top of animal cruelty content.

Fake rescue videos that show puppies, kittens, and monkeys placed in dangerous situations just for the camera are not only cruel to animals, but exploit humans' compassion, too. Unsuspecting people who want to help are duped into promoting animal abuse with their clicks as well as their wallets. There's no excuse for these cruel, deceptive videos to be permitted, and social media platforms must do more to stop their proliferation.



Nina Jackel, President, Lady Freethinker

LEGISLATION

To date, very few countries have implemented laws focused on online safety. In 2023, the European Union introduced the Digital Services Act, and Australia, India, Singapore and Sri Lanka have also developed laws with a similar focus.[56,57,58,59] These laws have been created with the objective of protecting users from exposure to harmful content, to tackle illegal activities and to improve online safety. The UK Online Safety Act (2023) is one of the most comprehensive in terms of animal cruelty content prohibition, with focus on the social media platforms that could face “fines of up to £18m or 10% of qualifying worldwide revenue (whichever is greater)” for breaches.[60,61] It remains to be seen what forms of cruelty will be covered by this law, and if this will have an impact on the proliferation of animal cruelty content, including Fake Rescues.

General animal welfare laws vary from country to country but some will likely be applicable in the country in which the content is made. For example, laws which prohibit the keeping of certain animals as pets (such as wild animals or endangered species), or those which protect animals from injury, abuse, stress or neglect. However, utilizing these laws to tackle content creators can be a real challenge, even for organizations on the ground. Locating perpetrators can be difficult, as location information can be hard to find on social media. If creators are falsely claiming to be an animal rescue organization and taking money under this guise, there may be grounds for suspected fraud, but again, gathering sufficient evidence can be extremely difficult.



8. CONCLUSION

“

As creators evolve their ideas on how to hurt animals, and increasingly find ways to disguise their activities as genuine rescues, the challenge of identifying and tackling such content will continue.

”

CONCLUSION

Animals face incredibly traumatic experiences, including injury and death, in the name of entertainment and profit. There are few limits to the torment that Fake Rescue content creators will inflict on animals in order to portray themselves as their saviors.

As creators evolve their ideas on how to exploit animals, and increasingly find ways to disguise their activities as genuine rescues, the challenge of identifying and tackling such content will continue. Animals are harmed in an ever-evolving number of ways in Fake Rescue content.

Fake rescue creators are not only taking advantage of animals; they are also exploiting well-meaning people by misleading them into watching animal cruelty disguised as rescue. They are even scamming caring individuals out of their money, when asking for donations that will likely never be used to help animals in need. This also potentially has a damaging impact on real animal rescue organizations, by depriving them of funds they so urgently need.

However, we can counter this by being aware of the sustaining indicators of Fake Rescue, and by approaching animal content with a critical eye.

It is crucial that we learn how to spot Fake Rescues to have them removed, reduce the demand and protect animals. But it is just as crucial so we can protect real animals in need. We need to be able to distinguish the real from the fake, to make sure we continue to support genuine animal protection organizations. These organizations alongside educational institutes and the press, will indeed create and share videos documenting real animal rescues. This is a vital part of their work to raise funds and awareness. This type of content is crucial for organizations to show their work, to draw attention to abuses and to make their animal welfare work transparent. Genuine animal organizations cannot lose the support of animal lovers to the benefit of animal cruelty creators.

Fake Rescue is not a new form of animal cruelty content; it has been around for years and animal activists have been calling on social media platforms to do more to tackle it. Social media platforms have made some steps to tackle this issue, but clearly more needs to be done. Platforms need to consult with experts and veterinarians, to make sure their policies are effective and implementable by their moderation teams. They require refinement and maintenance as content creators come up with new ideas for Fake Rescue content.

This document provides an in-depth guide into Fake Rescue and serves as the most comprehensive tool available to pinpoint such content. SMACC and our member organizations have offered our support to platforms, to train their moderators and refine their policies.

What is clear is that animals are suffering under the guise of animal rescue, and the public are being seriously misled. The public needs to be better informed on how they can identify Fake Rescue and take action against it. And social media platforms need to step up and take greater responsibility for the content on their platforms.

Social media is a wonderful tool for education and entertainment, but sadly it is also a medium for animal abuse. Exploitative animal content is spread far and wide online, mostly by well-meaning people who probably do not realize how harmful it is. Social media users hold a lot of power when it comes to what content goes viral and gets amplified online. We sincerely hope that this report raises awareness of the harm certain animal content can cause and empowers individual social media users to help decrease the impact of harmful portrayals of animals. Mindful social media consumers can help save lives, even if the majority of this work is done across the world and behind a screen.



Angela Grimes, CEO of Born Free USA

WHAT WE WANT

SMACC and our members are asking **social media platforms** to action the following:

1. Work with SMACC and its members to understand what Fake Rescue is and how to spot it. Take advantage of training offered by SMACC for moderators.
2. Prevent and remove fraudulent fake rescues postings, including by developing tools and algorithms designed to identify and remove harmful fake rescues from being posted on social media platforms.
3. Adopt standardized definitions – across all social media platforms and in consultation with experts – on animal cruelty content, including “fake rescues”, and include these in your policies and community guidelines
4. Share any information on fake animal rescue content creators with the relevant enforcement authorities to prevent harmful content being generated and to bring perpetrators to justice.
5. Develop an ongoing review and refinement process for policies and moderation around Fake Rescue content, to ensure they continue to be effective.
6. Ensure genuine animal rescue content is protected and allowed to be freely shared.

SMACC and our members are asking **governments** to action the following:

Introduce and robustly implement laws to hold social media platforms accountable for hosting harmful online content, including animal cruelty content and torture, and consult with independent experts on definitions of animal cruelty content when developing laws and policies on this issue.



9. HOW TO HELP

“

Our key message is to use critical thinking when viewing animal content. Take a step back and actively think about the situation you are viewing, the experience of the animals involved, and the person behind the camera.

”

HOW TO HELP

Our key message is to use critical thinking when viewing animal content. Take a step back and actively think about:

- the situation you are viewing;
- the experience of the animals involved; and
- the person behind the camera.

Look beyond the individual video and check the whole account. The list of indicators below is a guide to help you determine whether what you are watching is Fake Rescue content. If you suspect that is the case, report the content directly to the platform.

SMACC encourages the public to consider A.R.C when assessing potential Fake Rescue content:

HOW TO SPOT FAKE RESCUES: REMEMBER A.R.C



Authenticity

Always check the source!

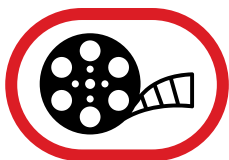
- No genuine animal organization associated
- Page has multiple fake rescue videos
- No follow-up on what happened to the animals
- Unprofessional rescue or veterinarian practices
- Human “rescuer” is always the same person



Reality Check

What is really happening?

- Unlikely to be a random encounter caught on camera
- Odd combination of species (snake vs cat)
- The same animals appear in multiple videos



Creation

How is the content created?

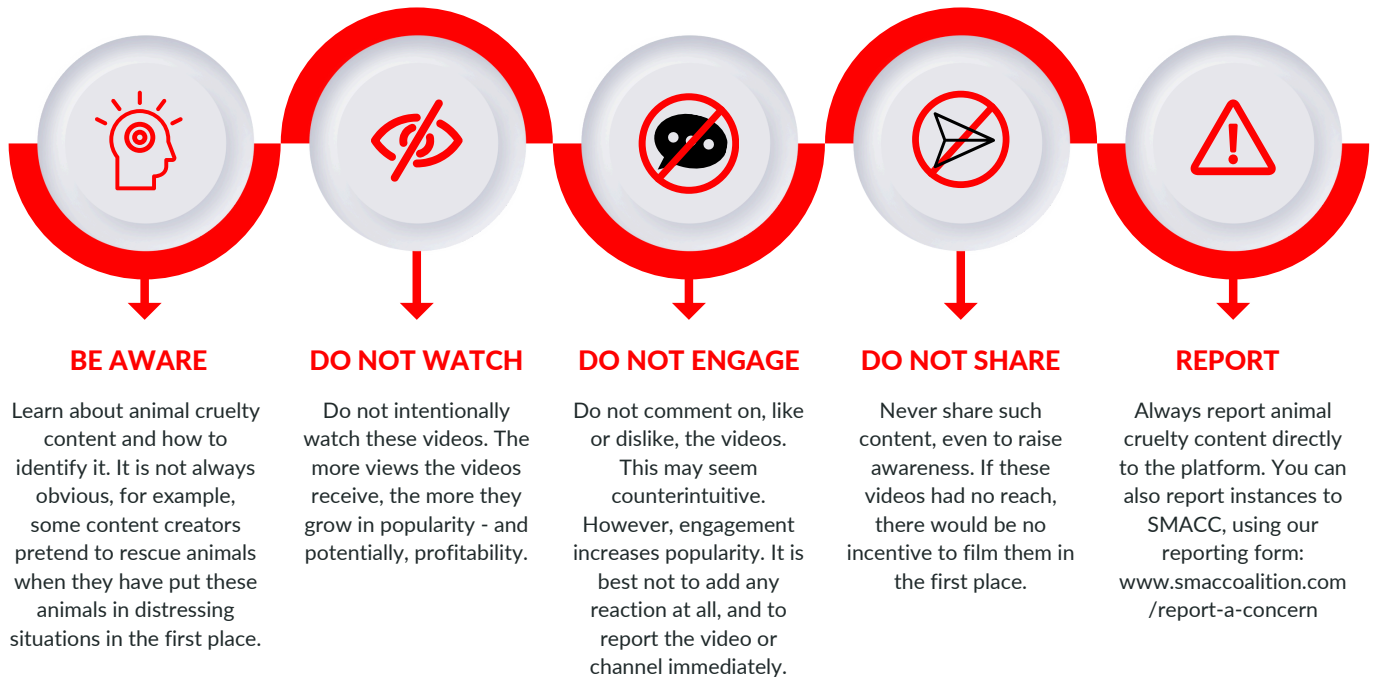
- Creator delays assisting the animal to film the situation
- Clear editing of videos
- Multiple camera angles indicating set up

Be aware. Don't be scammed by fake rescues. Report suspicious content.

FOLLOW OUR FIVE STEPS

SMACC's 5 Steps were created using knowledge of social media algorithms, to limit the spread of cruelty content and to bring it to the attention of platforms.

PLEASE FOLLOW SMACC'S 'FIVE STEPS TO STOP ONLINE CRUELTY'



WHY REPORTING TO THE PLATFORMS IS IMPORTANT

Reporting social media content to the platforms is one of the best tools social media users have to tackle animal cruelty. Reporting content shows social media platforms that animal cruelty content is a significant issue that is of serious concern to their users. It also flags to platforms the kinds of cruelty content that exist. Crucially, it can take multiple people reporting the same piece of content to lead to its removal, so it may take some time to see it removed, meaning we all need to be consistent with reporting to be effective. A review of SMACC's data showed that by February 2023, our volunteers had reported 3,251 links to the platforms, and that 47% of these links were removed by the platforms. SMACC continues to work with platforms to see this percentage increase, and to see animal cruelty content removed from the platforms altogether. Reports from users are vital to ensure this work is successful.

Learn more about reporting, how it works and how effective it is in SMACC's "Report It! Hub" at www.smaccoalition.com/report-it-hub.

WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

PLATFORMS

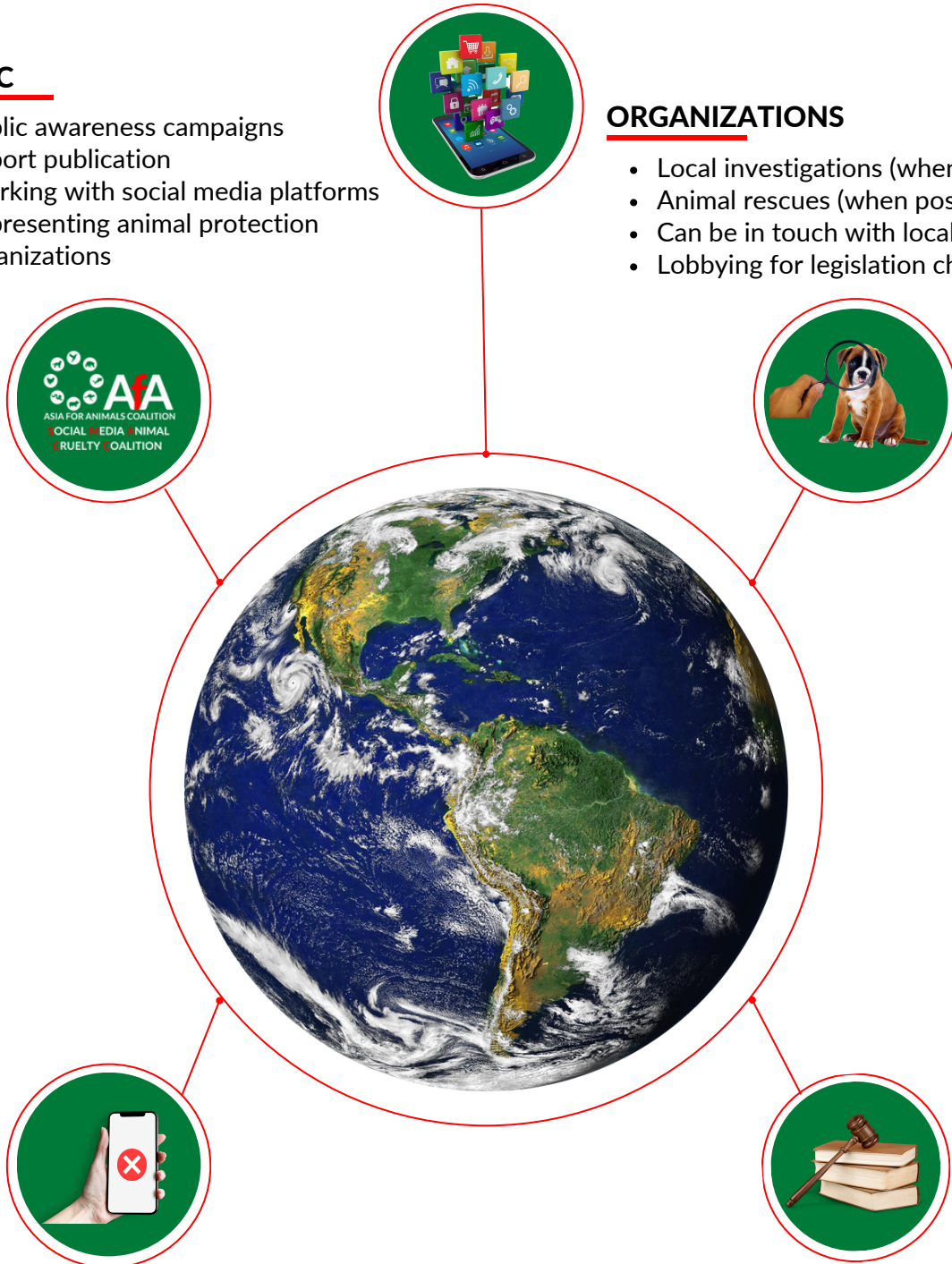
- Policy improvement, moderation and enforcement
- Removing content

SMACC

- Public awareness campaigns
- Report publication
- Working with social media platforms
- Representing animal protection organizations

ORGANIZATIONS

- Local investigations (when possible)
- Animal rescues (when possible)
- Can be in touch with local authorities
- Lobbying for legislation changes



MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

- Report animal cruelty to the platforms
- By never watching, engaging, commenting or sharing such content, help give these videos no visibility or profitability

GOVERNMENTS

- Responsible for laws and their enforcement
- Responsible for prosecutions and arrests

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to all collaborators of this report:

REPORT AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

The Asia for Animals team, Born Free Foundation, Born Free USA, Lady Freethinker, Humane Society International, Welttierschutzgesellschaft e.V and World Animal Protection.

SUPPORTING SMACC MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

Action for Primates, Animal Concerns Research and Education Society, Animal Defenders International, Animals Asia Foundation, Born Free Foundation, Born Free USA, the Civet Project, Europäischer Tier-und Naturschutz e.V, Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations, Freedom for Animals, Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust, Humane Society International, International Animal Rescue, International Primate Protection League, IUCN Section on Small Apes, Korean Animal Rights Advocates, Lady Freethinker, North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance, Pan African Sanctuary Alliance, Panthera Africa, Prime Earth, RSPCA, SoiDog, Susy Utzinger Foundation for Animal Welfare, Taiwan SPCA, Welttierschutzgesellschaft e.V, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, World Animal Protection and World Parrot Trust.

OUR DEDICATED VOLUNTEER RESEARCHERS

Alison Ellerington, Anna Hamann, Anna Schager, April Mckay, Erna van der Ploeg, Giuliano De Rosa, Jane Gregory, Jennifer Dunn, Karen L Deighton, Norma I Coates, and Shirley Joy Swaine, Tiffany Engke Arnold and others. Also to Leanne Fogarty for proofreading.

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We wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the trauma that can be felt by those witnessing this cruelty in order to assist in this work and to acknowledge that without you all this team effort would not have been possible. Thank you, you make the world a better place.



SUPPORTED BY THE ASIA FOR ANIMALS COALITION

On behalf of the undersigned organizations around the globe and the many millions of members and animals they represent:

ASIA FOR ANIMALS COALITION MEMBERS

- Anima Society for the Protection of Animals (Macau) (ANIMA)
- Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES)
- Animal People, Inc
- Animal Protection Denmark
- Animal Rescue Cambodia (ARC)
- Animals Asia Foundation (AAF)
- Blue Cross of India (BCI)
- Born Free Foundation
- Environment & Animal Society of Taiwan
- Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations (FIAPO)
- Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS)
- Humane Society International (HSI)
- International Animal Rescue (IAR)
- Jane Goodall Institute - Nepal
- Philippine Animal Welfare Society (PAWS)
- Samayu
- Sarawak Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA)
- Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Hong Kong (SPCA HK)
- Taiwan Human-Animal Studies Institution (THASI)
- Taiwan Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals 台灣防止虐待動物協會 (TSPCA)
- VShine Animal Protection Association
- World Animal Protection (WAP)



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APPENDIX 1 - Fake Rescue themes

FAKE RESCUE THEMES	COUNT
Found to be abandoned	316
Rescued from being trapped/stuck	294
Rescued from being attacked by animal/s	160
Receiving 'treatment' for injury or sickness	101
Rescued from being drowned	43
Rescued from unnatural infestation of organisms	40
Rescued from being buried	27
Other	23
Receiving CPR or other form of resuscitation	10
Rescued from an implausible situation	4
Rescued from being electrocuted or other severe physical trauma	4

APPENDIX 2 - Fake Rescue indicators

FAKE RESCUE INDICATORS	COUNT
No genuine animal organization associated	605
Unlikely to be a random encounter caught on camera	538
Page/ account has multiple fake rescue or similar posts	489
No follow up on what happened to the animals	471
Creator delays assisting the animal to film the situation	410
Clear editing of videos	379
Lack of or inappropriate rescue equipment used	298
Other	226
The human "rescuer" is always the same person	162
Medical care or facilities look to be fake or unofficial	158
The same animal/s appear in multiple content	143
Multiple camera angles	108
Species not native to the habitat/area shown	24

APPENDIX 3 - Featured animals

ANIMALS	IUCN STATUS*	COUNT
DOGS & CATS - Cats	-	264
DOGS & CATS - Dogs	-	130
PRIMATES - Macaques (all or unspecified)	sd	83
PRIMATES - All/general/unspecified	-	43
PRIMATES - Macaques (Long-tailed macaque)	(EN)	37
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS - Turtles (all or unspecified)	sd	28
PRIMATES - Macaques (Stump-tailed macaque)	(VU)	15
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS - Snakes (all or unspecified)	sd	11
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS - Snakes (pythons)	sd	6
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS - (all or unspecified)	sd	3
LABORATORY/COMPANION ANIMALS - Rabbits	-	2
PRIMATES - Macaques (Northern pig-tailed macaque)	(VU)	2
BIRDS - All/general/unspecified	sd	1
BIRDS - Owls	sd	1
BIRDS - Raptors	sd	1
FARMED ANIMALS - Birds (chickens/hens)	-	1
FARMED ANIMALS - Goats	sd	1
PRIMATES - Macaques (Arunachal macaque)	(EN)	1
PRIMATES - Macaques (Southern pig-tailed macaque)	(EN)	1
PRIMATES - Slow lorises	sd	1
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS - Alligators	sd	1
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS - Frogs/toads (all or unspecified)	sd	1
WILDLIFE (other) - Hedgehogs	(LC)	1

*LC - Least Concern

VN - Vulnerable

EN - Endangered

sd - species-dependant

APPENDIX 4 - Fake rescue content in each platform

PLATFORM	COUNT
Facebook	488
TikTok	249
YouTube	236
Instagram	43
Twitter/X	6

APPENDIX 5- Donation request on content from each platform

PLATFORM	COUNT
YouTube	81
Instagram	17
TikTok	15
Facebook	12
Twitter/X	2

APPENDIX 6 - Fake rescue themes on Facebook

FAKE RESCUE THEMES	COUNT
Rescued from being trapped/stuck	180
Rescued from being attacked by animal/s	98
Found to be abandoned	93
Receiving 'treatment' for injury or sickness	50
Rescued from being drowned	18
Rescued from being buried	17
Rescued from unnatural infestation of organisms	14
Other	7
Receiving CPR or other form of resuscitation	4
Rescued from an implausible situation	4
Rescued from being electrocuted or other severe physical trauma	3

APPENDIX 7- Fake rescue themes on TikTok

FAKE RESCUE THEMES	COUNT
Rescued from being trapped/stuck	76
Found to be abandoned	71
Rescued from being attacked by animal/s	44
Receiving 'treatment' for injury or sickness	25
Rescued from being drowned	14
Rescued from unnatural infestation of organisms	8
Rescued from being buried	5
Other	3
Receiving CPR or other form of resuscitation	2
Rescued from being electrocuted or other severe physical trauma	1
Rescued from an implausible situation	0

APPENDIX 8- Fake rescue themes on YouTube

FAKE RESCUE THEMES	COUNT
Found to be abandoned	145
Rescued from being trapped/stuck	25
Receiving 'treatment' for injury or sickness	16
Rescued from unnatural infestation of organisms	15
Other	13
Rescued from being attacked by animal/s	12
Rescued from being drowned	7
Receiving CPR or other form of resuscitation	2
Rescued from being buried	1
Rescued from an implausible situation	0
Rescued from being electrocuted or other severe physical trauma	0

APPENDIX 9- Fake rescue themes on Instagram

FAKE RESCUE THEMES	COUNT
Rescued from being trapped/stuck	11
Receiving 'treatment' for injury or sickness	9
Found to be abandoned	5
Rescued from being attacked by animal/s	5
Rescued from being drowned	4
Rescued from being buried	4
Rescued from unnatural infestation of organisms	3
Receiving CPR or other form of resuscitation	2
Other	0
Rescued from an implausible situation	0
Rescued from being electrocuted or other severe physical trauma	0

APPENDIX 10- Fake rescue themes on Twitter/X

FAKE RESCUE THEMES	COUNT
Found to be abandoned	2
Rescued from being trapped/stuck	2
Rescued from being attacked by animal/s	1
Receiving 'treatment' for injury or sickness	1
Rescued from being drowned	0
Rescued from unnatural infestation of organisms	0
Other	0
Receiving CPR or other form of resuscitation	0
Rescued from an implausible situation	0
Rescued from being electrocuted or other severe physical trauma	0
Rescued from being buried	0