



Views that abuse:

The rise of fake “animal rescue”
videos on YouTube

Contents

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Views that abuse: the rise of fake “animal rescue” videos on YouTube

Foreword	03
Summary	04
Introduction	05
Methods	06
Results	07
Main findings	12
Animal welfare	13
Conservation concern	13
How to spot a fake animal rescue	14
YouTube policy	15
Call to action	15
References	16



Image: A Lar gibbon desperately tries to break free from the grip of a Reticulated python in footage from a fake “animal rescue” video posted on YouTube. The Endangered Lar gibbon is just one of many species of high conservation concern being targeted in these videos. The use of these species, even in small numbers, could have damaging impacts on the survival of remaining populations.

Foreword

Social media is ubiquitous. There were an estimated 3.6 billion social media users worldwide in 2020 representing approximately half of the world’s population.

Hundreds of hours of video content are being uploaded to YouTube every minute, reflecting the rise in demand for digital video content among internet users.

Unfortunately, as our report uncovers, some of the ‘stars’ of this content are animals that are being cruelly exploited in the name of profit and entertainment. What makes fake “animal rescue” content even worse is its duplicitous nature – what these videos portray is exactly the opposite of what is happening. Animals are deliberately being put in harm’s way.

World Animal Protection has a long history of campaigning against the abuse of wildlife in the name of entertainment and exposing the link between online and offline cruelty. Back in 2017 we revealed the alarming trend of taking cruel selfies with wild animals for Instagram, which started to

warn its users about the harm of taking irresponsible photos including those with captive wild animals, after hundreds of thousands of people urged for the social media giant to act.

This new report is timely. As COVID-19 has severely restricted people’s ability to connect in person, technology has been there to help bridge the gap and there has been a reported YouTube usage and subscriber surge due to home isolation in response to the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, no meaningful action has been taken by YouTube to fulfil the promise it made earlier in 2021 to ban fake “animal rescue” videos from its platform – in fact the problem seems to have worsened.

As the biggest online video platform with billions of users across the world, YouTube has a distinct responsibility. World Animal Protection urges YouTube to take the urgent and longer-term steps to combat the videos that are driving this alarming new form of animal cruelty – the clicks, shares, and views that abuse.

Nick Stewart
Global Head of Campaigns
World Animal Protection



Image: Footage from a video posted on YouTube showing the fake “rescue” of a Radiated rat snake from the grips of a Short-toed snake eagle. Raptors depicted as “predator” in these videos often show physical signs of abuse such as missing feathers and clipped wings.

Summary

A disturbing new type of animal abuse has recently appeared online: fake “animal rescues”. These cruel videos depict animals including cats and dogs placed in staged situations “in the wild”, such as near “predators” including snakes and crocodiles, only to be “rescued” just in time by a human passing by.

Our investigation reveals that this disturbing new type of animal abuse is far more prevalent on social media platforms than previously thought. In total, we found 181 different fake animal rescue videos published on YouTube between October 2018 and May 2021. The 50 most viewed videos alone had collectively been viewed 133.5 million times and secured 13 million subscribers to their channels.

Moreover, evidence suggests this cruel online phenomenon is accelerating...

Despite YouTube’s public pledge on March 25th 2021 to address this animal abuse, between March 26th and June 1st 2021 we identified an additional 47 videos, posted across 15 different channels, that had already collectively acquired over 7 million views and 2.7 million subscribers on YouTube. This broken promise highlights how cruel content can quickly grow and spread online when social media platforms fail to act appropriately.

Social media platforms should not give animal abuse an audience. YouTube must stick to its public pledge and act quickly to review and remove videos that depict this type of horrific animal abuse that are also targeting species of conservation concern. In the long term, it must step up to its responsibility and publicly share its strategy and plans to prevent this type of content from being uploaded in the first place.

Introduction

Social media platforms act as both a marketplace and forum for wildlife, with the ability to either promote or prevent wildlife abuse.¹ Cruel wildlife videos of concern, which have gone viral in the past include those that depict a wide range of animal abuse including animals fighting each other, humans eating animals alive, humans hunting animals, and humans torturing animals.² World Animal Protection has also led the push for social media platforms to prevent cruel wildlife selfies.³

Now a disturbing new type of animal abuse has appeared online: fake “animal rescues”. These cruel videos depict animals including cats and dogs placed in staged situations “in the wild”, such as near “predators” including snakes and crocodiles, only to be “rescued” just in time by a human passing by.⁴ These cruel contrived videos can result in serious long-term negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of the animals that are being repeatedly exploited for

entertainment. In some cases, depending on the species involved, they can also raise conservation concerns and severe public health risks too.

A recent investigation from LadyFreethinker² focused on YouTube identified 17 of these fake animal rescues across 6 different channels, with 41.6 million views and 2.9 million subscribers combined. The aim of this World Animal Protection report was to delve deeper into the particularly cruel online phenomenon to gain a better understanding of the full extent of its current foothold on social media. In particular, we focused our efforts on the most viewed fake animal rescue videos on YouTube and those that had been posted on YouTube after its announcement to crack down on this type of animal abuse in March 2021. Lastly, we aimed to explore whether YouTube is doing enough to protect wild animals from exploitation.

Image: A video posted on YouTube showing the fake “rescue” of a cat who strives to protect her litter of kittens from predation by a Reticulated python. Snakes exploited and depicted as “predator” in these videos often show physical signs of abuse including bleeding snouts and damaged rostral scales.



Methods

YouTube is one of the most popular online video sharing sites, and as of January 2021 was the 2nd most-accessed site on the internet.⁵ YouTube requires users to sign up with a profile so that they can then upload videos and/or create channels, subscribe to peoples' video feeds, and create comments or comment on threads on videos.⁶ YouTube is policed by the public who can designate certain videos as "animal abuse".¹ However, a considerable amount of published content remains unregulated due to poorly established policy guidelines and limited enforcement disproportionate to the volume of data uploaded.⁷

For online data collection we used two different search terms within YouTube to identify fake "animal rescue" videos. Inclusion criteria involved the portrayal of a wild animal predation where a human intervenes to prevent the "prey" from being consumed and/or otherwise harmed. Exceptions were made for videos showing harm to animals as a tactic

to oppose animal cruelty (for example by other non profit organizations, undercover investigations, and government awareness programs). First, videos were ordered by the number of views and the ten most viewed were selected for further analysis. Second, videos were ordered by upload date and any videos posted between March 26th and June 1st 2021 were selected for further analysis.

Once selected, the following information was manually extracted and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet: Video web address (URL), search term used, species identified, IUCN Red List status, CITES Appendices listings⁸, and species interactions present (i.e. whether they were depicted as a "predator" or "prey"). Species were determined through analysis of the animal(s) featured in comparison to images and information sourced through online research (via Google) and the IUCN Red List.

Image: A human "rescues" a chicken from a Short-toed eagle in footage taken from a video posted on YouTube. In many of these videos the "rescuer" presents the "predator" and "prey" closely to each other, increasing the psychological distress caused to the animals during the staged situation.



Results



Figure 1 - Screenshots taken from fake "animal rescue" videos published on YouTube

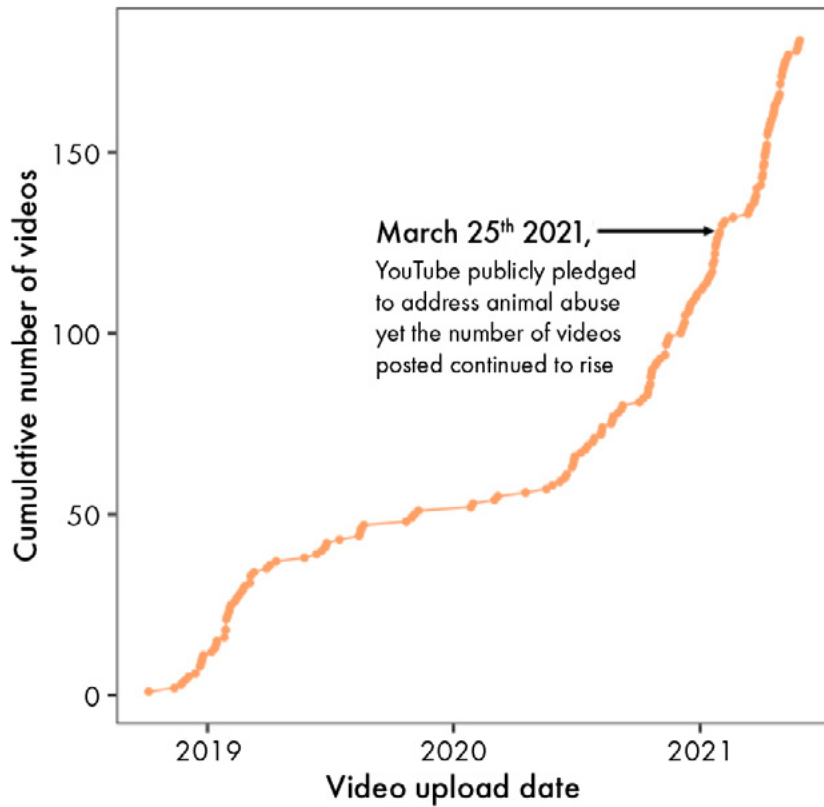


Figure 2 - Cumulative number of fake “animal rescue” videos published by video upload date

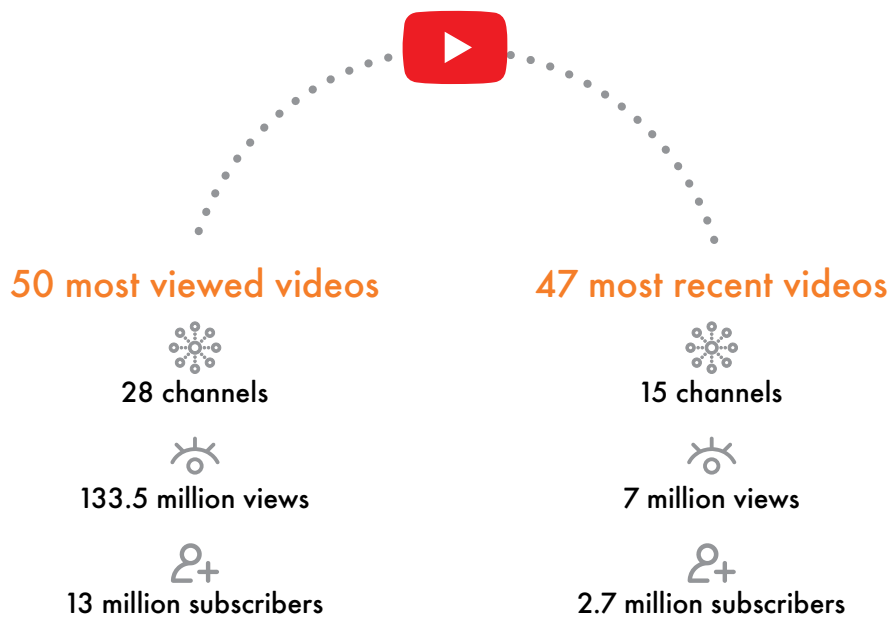
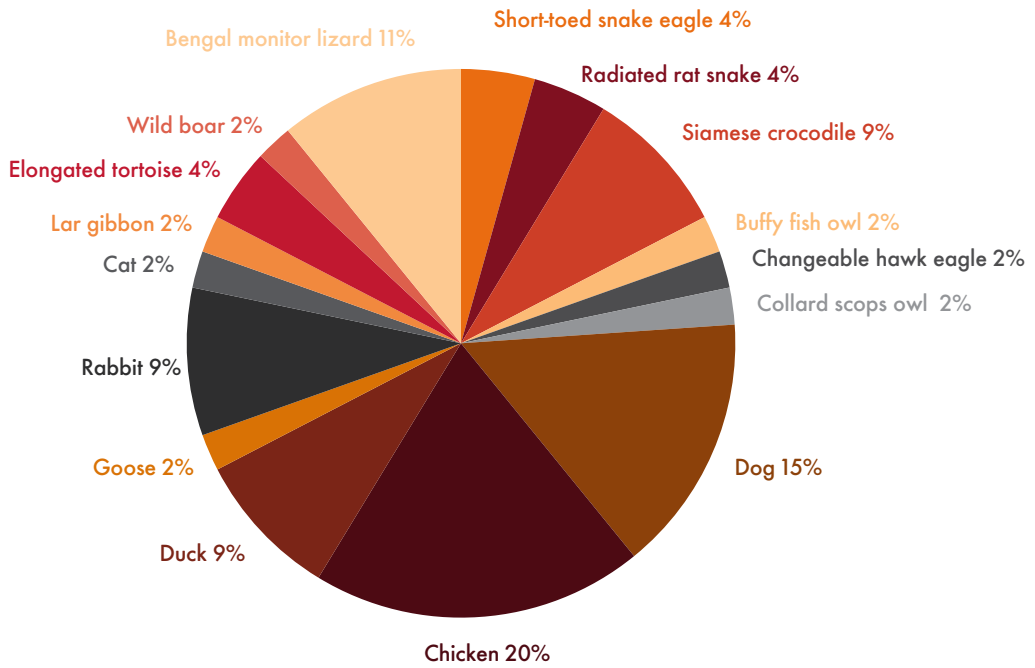


Figure 3 - Reaching far and wide: the audience for fake “animal rescue” videos

10 most viewed videos

"Prey" species



"Predator" species

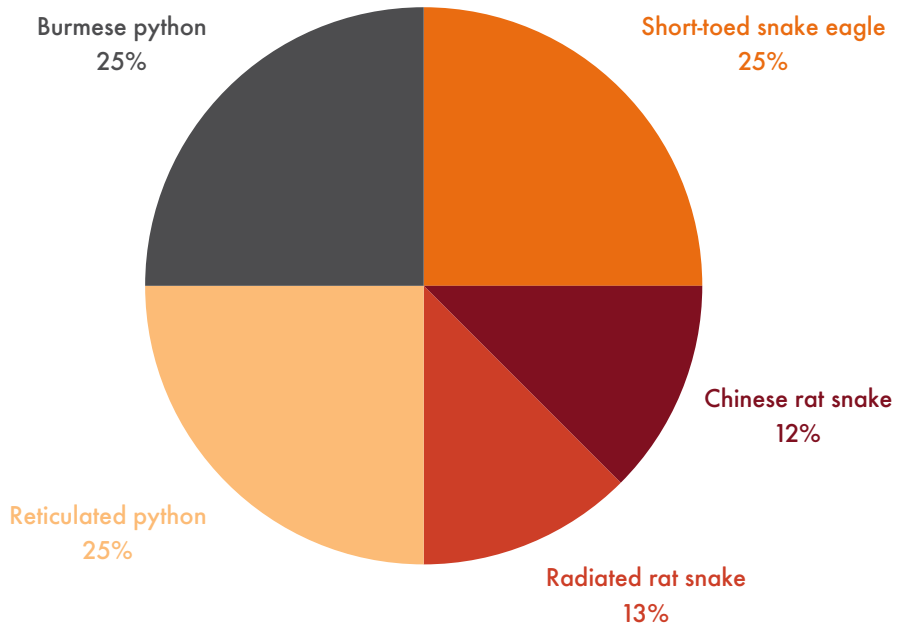
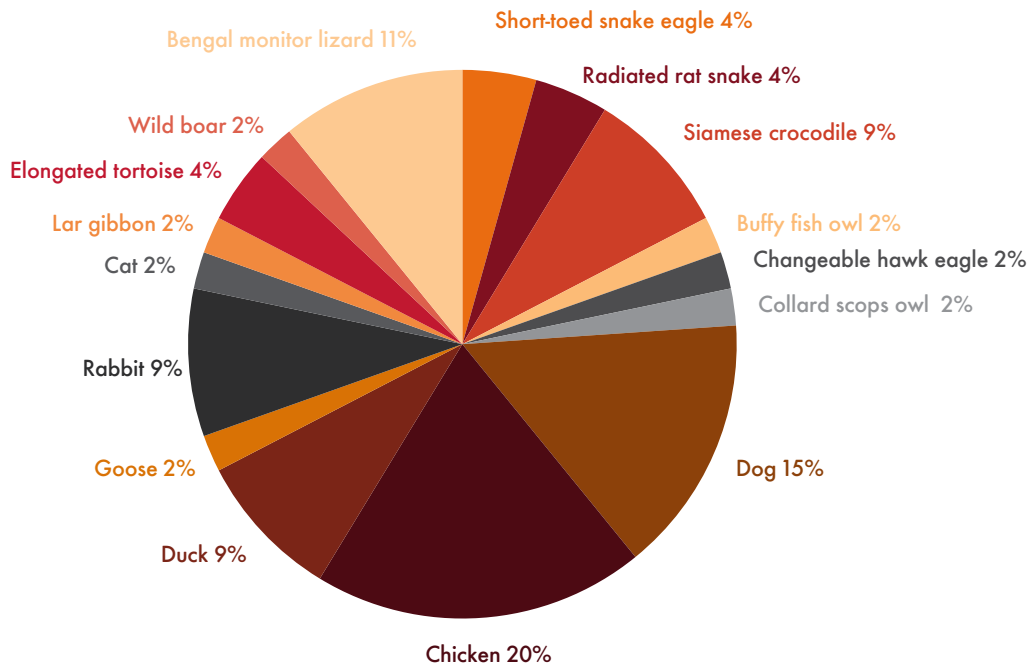


Figure 4a - "Prey" and "predator" species identified in the 10 most viewed fake "animal rescue" videos

47 most recent videos

"Prey" species



"Predator" species

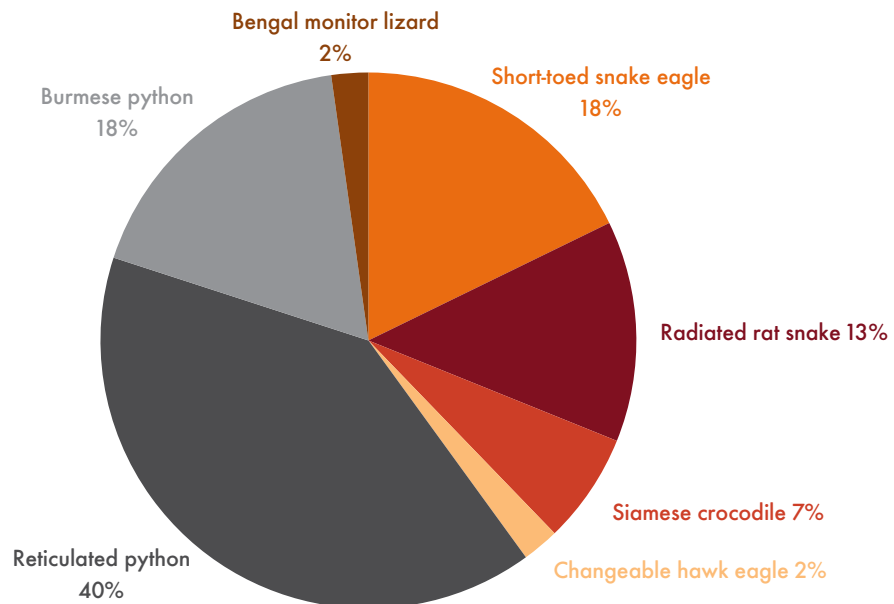


Figure 4b - "Prey" and "predator" species identified in the 47 most recent fake "animal rescue" videos

Table 1 - “Predator” and “prey” species featured in the 10 most viewed fake “animal rescue” videos and 47 most recent fake “animal rescue” videos (published since March 26th, 2021) identified during this study and their associated conservation and CITES status.

Species	“Prey”	“Predator”	CITES Appendix	IUCN Red List Status
Bengal monitor (<i>Varanus bengalensis</i>)	X	X	I	Least Concern
Buffy fish owl (c.f. <i>Ketupa ketupu</i>)	X			Least Concern
Burmese python (<i>Python molurus bivittatus</i>)		X	II	Vulnerable
Cat	X			
Changeable hawk eagle (<i>Nisaetus cirrhatus</i>)	X	X	II	Least Concern
Chicken	X			
Chinese rat snake (c.f. <i>Ptyas korros</i>)		X		
Collard scops owl (c.f. <i>Otus lettia</i>)	X			Least Concern
Dog	X			
Duck	X			
Elongated tortoise (<i>Indotestudo elongata</i>)	X		II	Critically Endangered
Goose	X			
Human	X			
Lar gibbon (<i>Hylobates lar</i>)	X		I	Endangered
Pigeon	X			
Rabbit	X			
Radiated rat snake (c.f. <i>Coelognathus radiata</i>)	X	X		Least Concern
Reticulated python (<i>Malayopython reticulatus</i>)		X	II	Least Concern
Short-toed snake eagle (c.f. <i>Circaetus gallicus</i>)	X	X	II	Least Concern
Siamese crocodile (<i>Crocodylus siamensis</i>)	X	X	I	Critically Endangered
Wild boar (<i>Sus sp.</i>)	X			

Main findings

Our investigation into fake animal rescues has revealed that this disturbing new type of animal abuse involving both 6 types of domesticated animal and 14 wild species (including birds, mammals, and reptiles) is far more prevalent on social media platforms than previously thought. In total, we found 181 different fake animal rescue videos published on YouTube between October 2018 and May 2021 using two search terms alone. Perhaps of most pressing concern is the fact that the number of these videos posted online has continued to rise over this time period, including after the public commitment made by YouTube to put a stop to this type of animal abuse in March 2021.

Our review of the 50 most viewed fake animal rescues serves to expose just how large an audience these cruel videos are currently able to reach. We identified that these 50 videos (involving the exploitation of lizards, snakes, eagles and crocodiles) posted across 28 different channels, had collectively acquired over 133.5 million views and 13 million subscribers on YouTube alone. It is

particularly concerning that these videos accumulated more than half a million “likes” (more than treble the number of “dislikes”) which suggests many viewers are not able to identify the animal suffering involved with these types of posts on social media.

Moreover, our deep dive into the fake “animal rescues” posted after March 25th demonstrates the extent of YouTube’s failure to prevent this type of animal suffering from being posted on its platform. Using two search terms alone, we identified 47 videos, posted across 15 different channels, that had already collectively acquired over 7 million views and 2.7 million subscribers on YouTube. The videos most frequently feature chickens, dogs, and monitor lizards as the “prey” with dogs and Burmese pythons as the most common “prey-predator” combination. The fact that these videos were posted and given the time to attract such a substantial following (one of these videos having already acquired more than 6 million views) should be a serious cause for concern.

Perhaps of most pressing concern is the fact that the number of these videos posted online has continued to rise over this time period, including after the public commitment made by YouTube to put a stop to this type of animal abuse in March 2021.

Animal welfare

The animals (including chickens, ducks, puppies and primates) cruelly set up as the “prey” in these videos are clearly subject to intense suffering. In one particularly distressing video, a panicking Lar gibbon desperately tries to break free from being trapped in the grip of a Reticulated python. In another, a cat strives to protect her litter of kittens from another constrictor. Although these “prey” animals are eventually “rescued”, the sad reality is that this cruelty is set-up - inflicted purely for entertainment and profit. Moreover, sadly this charade is likely to be repeated several times to get the “best” footage to maximize views and shares.

However, it is important to note that the animals being depicted as “predators” in these fake animal rescue videos are also being exploited too. It is likely that their suffering will have begun when they were first captured, transported and then held in captivity while preparation for making the video was underway. 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”. Moreover, close inspection indicates it is likely that the same animal is exploited as the “predator” in several different videos.

With regards to some of the welfare concerns associated with snakes exploited and depicted as “predators” in these videos, physical signs of abuse before the “attack” include dehydrated snakes with bleeding snouts, and damaged rostral scales. Behavioural signs of concern include rapid body movement, inflation of the body, and hissing before the “attack”. There is also atypical behaviour during the “attack” such as the way that the python is very loosely wrapped around their supposed “prey” and human directed aggression including attempts to bite the “rescuer”.

Similarly, with regards to raptors and owls exploited and depicted as “predators” in some of these videos, physical signs of abuse before the “attack” include underweight birds with missing feathers, and clipped wings. Behavioural signs of concern include open mouth breathing before the “attack” and atypical behaviour during the “attack” such as the way that the bird lands awkwardly and off balance next to the snake they are supposedly attacking, and their stunned response - with no attempt to escape or retaliate - when initially bitten by the snake.

Conservation concern

Our review of the most recent fake “animal rescue” videos also confirms that species considered to be threatened by extinction are being targeted. Species of conservation concern include the Critically Endangered Siamese crocodile (8 videos) and Elongated tortoise (2 videos), the Endangered Lar gibbon (1 video), and the Vulnerable Burmese python (8 videos). Three species are also listed on

CITES Appendix I (Lar gibbon, Siamese crocodile, Bengal monitor) and five are listed on Appendix II (Changeable hawk eagle, Elongated tortoise, Short-toed snake eagle, Burmese python, Reticulated python). Given their high conservation status, the use of these species, even in small numbers, could have damaging impacts on the survival of remaining wild populations.

How to spot a fake animal rescue

This investigation into fake “animal rescue” videos on YouTube uncovers a disturbing rise in this type of animal abuse. But our findings only scratch the surface, and our investigation to uncover the true scale of this growing trend is still ongoing. We anticipate that in addition to the videos we have identified there will likely be many more found online.

Some videos on YouTube will depict genuine animal rescues. But before you “like” or share an animal rescue video please take a moment to stop and think - is it a fake animal rescue? Here are some key things to consider that can help you to make the right choice.

-
- 1 Are there any obvious signs of physical injury (e.g. cuts, wounds, clipped wings) or stress related behaviour (e.g. panting, cowering, attempts to retreat) to either “predator” or “prey” that can be seen before the “attack”?
 - 2 Are the “predator” or “prey” animals in unnatural settings that you would not expect to usually find them under normal circumstances (e.g. a forest species out in open scrubland or a bird of prey in a hole along the dry sand bank of a river)?
 - 3 Do the “predator” or “prey” animals demonstrate any atypical behaviour during the “attack” itself (e.g. snakes very loosely coiled around “prey” or “predators” responding in a timid / fearful way to the human “rescuer” with no attempt to escape being handled)?
 - 4 When looking at multiple videos posted by the same channel, does it appear that the same animal(s) or habitat locations are being used repeatedly (e.g. same fur markings / scale patterns on the animals, or same hole in the ground)?
 - 5 Does the human “rescuer” respond inappropriately once the “predator” and “prey” have been separated (e.g. some videos show the “rescuer” holding the “prey” and “predator” roughly in two separate hands but “present” them closely to each other, and / or carries them away together - rather than keeping them a safe distance apart)?

YouTube policy

Equally as concerning as the rise in fake animal rescue videos is the lack of action by the platform on which it is promoted. YouTube has been asked repeatedly by NGOs to share its new policy and implementation timeline since announcing the plan on March 25th 2021. YouTube's current public facing [Community Guidelines](#) rely on viewers to use YouTube's 'flagging feature' to report inappropriate content.

While the '[Violent or graphic content policies](#)' [Guidelines page](#) encourages viewers to report single violations or the

channel at issue, and offers the category of animal abuse to alert YouTube staff, the videos can remain online with millions of views.

World Animal Protection believes that YouTube must act on the findings of this report and implement its public pledge to remove and prevent this content urgently.

Call to action

In the short term, YouTube must fulfil its public pledge made in March this year (2021) and act quickly to review and remove videos that depict this type of horrific animal abuse. It is very concerning to see that no meaningful action seems to have been taken by YouTube to date, and that new videos featuring fake wild animal rescues have been posted since April 2021 - with fears that they are increasing in terms of the variety of species exploited and the severity of suffering they endure. The longer these types of clips stay online, and

the more people view them, the greater the risk that they will spawn copycats elsewhere.

In the long term, YouTube and other social media platforms must step up to their responsibility and publicly share their strategies and plans to prevent this type of content from being uploaded in the first place. Ultimately, funds, effort and energy need to be channelled to prevent this phenomenon from spreading any further.



Image: A human "rescues" a Buffy fish owl from predation by a Reticulated python in footage from a video posted on YouTube. Sadly, many of the raptors and owls exploited and depicted as either "prey" or "predator" in these videos show both physical and behavioural signs of welfare concern including underweight weight birds with missing feathers and open mouth breathing before the attack.

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Figure 5 - Screenshots taken from fake "animal rescue" videos published on YouTube

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