

FACTSHEET

Animals on the internet

The online world offers countless positive opportunities but like the real world, it also contains hazards and risks – much attention has been given to “e-safety” (Australia even has an [e-Safety Commissioner](#) and an Online Safety Act) but most of that attention is people-focused. Sadly, animals can also be victims or manipulated to scam people.

This factsheet highlights the ‘red flags’ to look out for and the steps you can take to protect yourself and animals from exploitation.

Fake animal rescue videos are staged dramatic situations designed to hook the viewer into watching, reacting, and sharing; those boosted views are monetised. In other words, a set-up for profit, but at a cost (suffering and even death) to the animals involved. Our [Cat Affairs Autumn 2023](#) article has more information.

What you should beware of:

- ▶ Videos from the same source repeatedly reuse the same location, animals, people, or rescue scenario
- ▶ Animals’ appearance and behaviour seems off: the ‘prey’ appears too calm, the ‘predator’ too distressed, or they show injuries that would not be caused by the events on-camera. Animals who appeared to be ‘glued to the spot’ might literally have been glued to a board or restrained in some other way to stop them from moving
- ▶ People in the video do not handle the animals, or navigate the terrain, safely
- ▶ One or more animals you see at the start of the video are not the same as you see at the end
- ▶ The presence of a camera crew is too convenient to be believable, or even blatantly ‘on cue’: for instance, a motorist not only has the camera already rolling, but also appears to know to slow down well before the animal on the roadside is visible.

What you can do:

- ✓ Report or flag any suspicious animal rescue material to the host site (eg Facebook). Do not ‘react’, share, or comment. Refer to the links at the end of this factsheet for more information
- ✓ Raise awareness: ask your cat meme friends if they have heard of fake rescue videos and what to look out for; talk to your children about them when discussing online safety
- ✓ Only engage with content from sources you know to be reputable.

Sanctuary scams are frauds where the perpetrator creates a website or social media account posing as a charitable animal sanctuary or rescue for the purpose of financial gain. They fabricate names and business information, and use stock or faked photos, or images and text stolen from the websites of real sanctuaries, passing them off as their own to convince users that they provide real assistance and care to real animals. The stolen/fake images are often accompanied by dramatic, fictional stories about the animals, and the scammer might also create posts thanking donors excessively.

Fake sanctuaries and rescues scam money from well-meaning animal lovers and divert much-needed funds from legitimate animal welfare charities. [ScamWatch](#) received numerous complaints of scam sanctuaries on social media in the wake of the 2019-20 Bushfires and COVID-19, indicating that scammers exploit natural and global disasters to make their money. [ScamWatch](#) also warns that scam sanctuaries' fundraising methods can be very pushy and predatory. In a similar vein, be very wary of personal/crowdfunding pleas for financial assistance for veterinary costs.

What you should beware of:

- ▶ Information about the organisation outside of their bogus website or Facebook page cannot be found in a Google search
- ▶ Their ABN is absent, falsified, or connected to an individual rather than a company on the [ABN Lookup](#); they are not indexed on the [ACNC's charity register](#)
- ▶ Written information is highly sensational or improbable; text might be copied from other websites
- ▶ Images can be reverse Google image searched and traced to the websites of real animal organisations or veterinary practices, or to stock photo websites; users who follow the pages of real sanctuaries might recognise them
- ▶ Donations are often be solicited aggressively or with excessive pleading, and donors are asked to pay into an individual's bank or PayPal account; receipts are not produced, or are counterfeited, or do not display the sanctuary's name.

What you can do:

- ✓ Report scams to the NSW Police Assistance Line 131 444; [ScamWatch](#), or [NSW Fair Trading](#) – you may choose to report anonymously, though this might limit any investigation. Include screenshots and other evidence of fraud and fakery in your report
- ✓ If you recognise any of the images, text or branding the scam sanctuary has stolen or imitated, notify the organisation to whom they rightfully belong. Include screenshots and other evidence in your report, and let the organisation know if you wish to maintain privacy in the matter
- ✓ Alert anyone you know who frequently donates to animal charities to the existence of scam sanctuaries. Inform them of the red flags or give them a copy of this factsheet.

Puppy and kitten scams more often involve puppies than kittens, and operate with the scammer posing as a breeder, typically of rare or highly prized breeds, and then taking payment for pets that do not exist. Puppy and kitten scams occasionally masquerade as rescue organisations. Other domestic animals, including restricted or banned breeds, as well as exotic pets have also been implicated. Animals might be advertised at low prices and the potential buyer is subjected to escalating demands for more and more money, to cover alleged transport, veterinary or registration costs. Scammers are highly particular about contact methods, preferring modes like WhatsApp which uses end-to-end encryption for greater security and reduced traceability. Some victims have reported receiving messages from several different email addresses, as scammers attempt to avoid leaving a trail.

Pet scams are humiliating and costly to victims, many of whom have lost thousands of dollars. These scams exploit consumer desire for pets (especially breeds that are popular and in short supply). [ScamWatch](#) and police agencies around Australia have noted a surge in puppy scams since the beginning of COVID-19.

What you should beware of:

- ▶ Pets offered for sale or adoption may be unusual or luxury breeds or are banned in NSW; scammers posing as breeders may offer several different breeds for sale
- ▶ Initial prices are low, and customers are then billed for more 'unforeseen' costs
- ▶ There is no opportunity for the customer to meet or personally select the animal, and the scammer finds excuses to refuse requests for in-person or video-call meetings
- ▶ They insist on excessively private means of contact, such as WhatsApp, and payment to overseas bank accounts or similarly suspicious means; communication may come from multiple different phone numbers or email addresses
- ▶ Necessary business information such as an ABN, a breeder identification number, valid microchip number or a rehoming number is absent or falsified; ABNs may be connected to individuals
- ▶ Their webpage contains images and text stolen from other websites: photos can be reverse Google image searched, and text has been copied from the pages of reputable breeders or shelters
- ▶ There is no information about the business online, apart from their website or social media page; in some cases, Googling the business name or number with the word 'scam' yields telling results.

What you can do:

- ✓ Only adopt pets from an authorised rehoming organisation (all authorised rehoming organisations must have a number, eg Cat Protection's Rehoming Organisation Number is R251000224) or from a registered breeder, eg via [Dogs NSW](#), [NSW Cat Fanciers Association](#), [Australian National Cats Inc \(ANCATS\)](#)
- ✓ Check the validity of microchip details, rehoming organisations, and Breeder Identification Number on the [NSW Pet Registry](#)

✓ Check the NSW Department of Primary Industries [guidelines on buying a cat or dog](#).

✓ If someone you know is considering bringing a pet into their life, encourage them to adopt from a shelter or to do solid research on breeds and registered breeders; discuss pet scams (and puppy farms) with them, or give them a copy of this factsheet.

“Cute” exotic pet videos fuel the illegal and unethical wildlife trade. An exotic pet is defined as a companion animal belonging to a species without a history of domestication or being kept as a pet. The buying, importing, exporting, selling, advertising, or supplying of exotic pets is outlawed in many jurisdictions, including Australia. The wildlife trade is exceptionally cruel, directly contributes to species endangerment and biodiversity loss, carries serious biosecurity risks, and is dangerous for both animals and humans.

The wildlife trade flourishes online; in the time of social media alone, it has boomed exponentially. As well as facilitating the trade, social media hosts a huge number of “cute” videos of wild and exotic animals in domestic settings. Disturbingly, although they are banned as pets in Australia, an internet search for “capuchin monkey” can return results for “capuchin monkey price” and “capuchin monkey for sale Australia”. There are videos of big cats appearing to lounge in backyards, caged African grey parrots swearing, raccoons eating from pet bowls, otters being walked on leashes and countless other examples. What is shown in these videos is highly inappropriate for the species but is framed as “adorable” or “funny”. Bright, happy music and positive text captions or commentary are often used.

Sometimes, the animals are described as “rescue” pets who were found injured, saved from unethical zoos or even from the wildlife trade itself.

Although they pretend to be positive and wholesome, these videos normalise and encourage the deadly exotic pet trade and the domestication of wildlife. By presenting wild animals no differently from domestic pets, these videos make exotic pet-keeping appear attractive, easy, and ethically sound. A [recent study](#) published in the journal *PLoS ONE* confirms the normalising effect these videos have on the wildlife trade. The research found viewer attitudes were overwhelmingly positive, suggesting poor public awareness of animal welfare, endangerment, and the extent of the wildlife trade. There is nothing good and everything bad about the trade in wildlife: unfortunately, these videos not only pretend otherwise, they convince viewers otherwise as well.

What you should beware of:

- ▶ The video shows wild or exotic animals in domestic settings (in homes, shops or marketplaces, on leashes, interacting with people or domestic pets)
- ▶ The title, music, captions, or general tone emphasises cuteness or comedy
- ▶ The animal is treated like a domestic pet or like a human baby or toddler
- ▶ The video makes an unusual pet look fun, easy to care for, or desirable.

What you can do:

- ✓ Don't watch or seek out such videos, and if you accidentally come across one, don't react, like or share, and ask your friends to do likewise
- ✓ Learn more about the protection and [regulation of wildlife](#) in Australia under the national Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, and research positive action taken by organisations like [World Animal Protection Australia](#) and the [Humane Society International Australia](#)
- ✓ [Report](#) a perceived breach of wildlife trade
- ✓ Get your wildlife viewing from reputable sources such as Australian Geographic, National Geographic and quality documentaries.

Resources

[Reporting to Facebook](#)
[Reporting to Instagram](#)
[Reporting to WhatsApp](#)
[Reporting to YouTube](#)

Learn more about [reverse Google image searches](#)

[Reporting to ScamWatch](#)

[ABN Lookup](#)
[ACNC Charity Lookup](#)
[NSW Pet Registry](#)

CHOICE article on [how to avoid online pet scams](#)

[Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\)](#)

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