Care of Young Wildlife
If You Care . . . Leave Them There!

Young Wildlife Belong in the Wild

The Problem
Wild animal parents are the best at raising normal wild babies to survive on their own. But every year, many people scoop up young wild animals in the mistaken belief that they are orphaned or neglected. They bring them to a wildlife rehabilitator or worse, attempt to raise them. In many cases, this is unnecessary or even harmful. Learn about how to help and how to avoid harming wildlife below.

Understand the Natural Behavior
The arrival of spring and summer also means the arrival of newborn and just-hatched wildlife. These young soon venture into the world on shaky legs or fragile wings. Some will not survive, but those early unsteady steps and flights are part of normal development. It helps young animals learn to take care of themselves. While some are learning survival from one or both parents, others normally receive little or no parental care. Often, wild animal parents stay away from their young when people are near. Because of their behavior, the most common species to be mistakenly "kidnapped" by humans are young fawns, cottontail rabbits, and fledgling birds. It is important to be familiar with normal behavior for these animals before assuming that they are in need of help.

Cottontail rabbits are born with no fur and closed eyes, but mature to independence at only 4 weeks old. The mother may only return at dawn and dusk to a shallow nest in the ground to feed her young. The rest of the time, they are covered over with grass. If you are not sure the mother is returning to the babies, you can put some leaves or light sticks over the grass covering. Then check back to see if the nest has been disturbed. If you see a rabbit that appears very small, but has its eyes open and is hopping around outside the nest, it is likely independent.

Songbirds spend about two weeks in the nest being fed from dawn to dusk by their parents. At about 2 weeks, they will make their first attempts at flying. Disturbing the nest close to this time can spook them to leave before they are really ready. This puts them at greater risk. This is a difficult period for young birds, when they are vulnerable to predators, pets and well-meaning humans. During the next few weeks, they will develop their flying skills and muscles by jumping and making short flights. They may spend short periods on the ground, or on low branches of shrubbery. They may be easy to approach, and have little fear of people. However, their parents keep a close watch, continuing to feed them as they move around. It is often possible to hear the young birds and their parents vocalizing to each other and, with patience, observe feeding. If a young bird is alert, fully feathered and moving around, and parents are in the vicinity, it is not in need of intervention.

White-tailed deer will give birth to one or two fawns during April and May. The newborn fawns will be hidden away in tall grass or under bushes while the adults are out feeding. They will lie quietly and often not move to avoid attracting predators. The doe will return to feed the fawn every 4-5 hours, and will sometimes move them to a new location. After a few weeks, the fawns will gain strength and be able to accompany the mother. If you find a fawn alone and quiet but alert and without obvious injuries, it is likely to be perfectly normal. It is best to keep children and pets away. Observe from a distance over a period of hours. Adult does may not approach if people are close by.

DO NO HARM
When people with no knowledge or experience attempt to handle or raise wildlife, these well-meaning acts of kindness tend to have the opposite result. Many of the animals that are “rescued” soon die despite their best efforts. Even if they do survive, mishandled wild animals don't learn normal wild animal behavior. Inappropriate care given to young wildlife often results in abnormal attachment to humans. After release, some return to places where people live, only to be attacked by domestic animals or to be hit by cars. Some become nuisances getting into stored food, trash cans, or dwellings. People have also been injured by tamed wildlife. Further, they may be thrust as unwelcome intruders into the home range of another member of their species.

**DO NOT** consider young wildlife as possible pets. Besides being illegal, wild animals are not well suited for life in captivity. Plus, they may carry diseases that can be given to people. Resist the temptation to take them out of the wild.

**HOW TO HELP**

However, when you encounter a young wild animal that is obviously injured or orphaned, call a Wildlife Rehabilitator for advice and help. Wildlife Rehabilitators are trained volunteers licensed by DEC. They are the only people legally allowed to receive and treat distressed wildlife. They have the experience, expertise, and facilities to successfully treat and release wild animals. The goal of the rehabilitator is to release a healthy animal back into the wild, where it belongs.

To locate a Wildlife Rehabilitator in your area, call your nearest DEC Regional Wildlife Office.