

# A Guide To Assisting Wildlife Babies: What to do when you find them

by Ronda DeVold, B.S., L.V.T., Minnesota

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## Is the baby really an orphan? 🧸

Each year (especially in the Spring), many people call us who have found a baby bird or mammal. People usually think the animal needs their help and want to bring it in. These well meaning individuals usually assume the babies are orphans.

Most babies are still under the watchful eye of their parents and are taken from them by people only trying to help. Unlike human babies, wild babies are not constantly watched by their parents and spend large amounts of time alone. (This is especially true of mammals.)

In most cases, wild animal babies should be left alone. The following is what we recommend to do in specific situations.

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## BABY BIRDS

1. **FLEDGLINGS** People often see baby birds that are partially feathered sitting on the ground below a tree and automatically assume that they fell out of the nest and need to be helped. At this stage in a birds development, they are considered "fledglings". Fledglings NORMALLY will jump or fall out of the nest. This is their "flight training" stage. The mother bird will then continue feeding the bird on the ground until the bird is able to fly (usually only takes a few

days). Unless injured, these birds should be left where they are. Efforts should be made to keep cats, dogs, and curious children away from the bird so the mother can continue to feed it.

### **Cat or Dog Danger?**

If a dog or cat is threatening the baby animal, do not instantly bring the baby in. Rather, keep the pet restrained the short time the baby is there. However, if the animal has already been attacked or picked up by the family pet and is injured, please bring the baby in as soon as possible.

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2. **NESTLINGS** Baby birds that are naked for the most part (featherless or feathers just starting to come in) are considered to be "nestlings". These birds stay in the nest and the parents come to feed them there. These babies, when found, are usually on the ground directly below the nest. This occurs either because the baby fell out, blew out (common after wind storms), or was "pushed" out by a sibling. One must realize that this last behavior is actually adaptive for some species. This way, only the strongest of the brood survive and go on to raise young themselves.

#### **What to do if you find a nestling that is out of the nest:**

The best thing to do is to try to place the bird back in its nest if at all possible. If the nest cannot be reached for some reason, the following works very well. (This is also the procedure to use if you find the whole nest on the ground.)

Make a "makeshift" nest out of a clean Cool-Whip container or margarine dish. Make holes in the bottom of it to allow for water drainage. Line the bowl with paper towels. Then tack the makeshift nest back up in the tree as close to the original nest as possible. Finally, place the baby bird(s) into this and leave. The parents will usually come back in a short time and will feed the babies in it just like it was the original nest. (Often, you will see the mother going back and forth between each "nest", feeding both sets of babies.) The only time we recommend bringing the baby birds in is if you KNOW that the mother is dead or if the babies are injured in any way. The natural parents do a much better job at raising their young than we could ever do. A baby bird that is featherless must be fed every 15-20 minutes from about sunrise to 10 pm! This obviously requires a large time commitment on the part of the foster parent.

#### **What if I already touched the birds, the mother won't come back, will she?**

People often believe this to be true and therefore think they need to keep the babies. This is simply NOT TRUE and is just an old wives tale. Birds in general have a very poor sense of smell (vultures are one exception) and will not mind the fact that you have handled them (but will be bothered by your presence by the babies).

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**If you do find a REAL orphan or injured baby bird, please do the following:**

1. Get it to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator AS SOON AS POSSIBLE; the longer the delay, the less chance it has of surviving
2. Keep the baby bird WARM and in a quiet, dark place until you can bring it in (a small cardboard box works well)
3. DO NOT give the baby bird any liquids (they get all they need from their food and very often will inhale any liquid)

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## **BABY MAMMALS**

These animals are usually found when the nest has been destroyed or disturbed in some way. Mentioned here are the two most common species we receive calls about.

### **1. BABY COTTONTAIL RABBITS**

Cottontail rabbits make their "nests" in small depressions in the grass. The nests are lined with fur from the mother and loosely covered with grass. They are frequently disturbed by people when they are mowing their grass or raking. In addition, dogs and cats find these nests and often kill or injure the babies.

**If a nest is found or distured, please do the following:**

Replace the baby rabbits back in their nest and leave them there unless they are injured or if you KNOW that the mother has been killed. Many people just assume the mother is dead because they "have been watching the nest all day and have not seen the mom come back at all". This is normal. Female cottontails only come to feed their young early in the morning and at dusk. This decreases the chance of alerting predators to the nest's location. If you are not sure if the mother is coming back to feed them, try placing a string over the nest. If the string has not moved by the following morning, she has not been back. If the babies are cool and appear very hungry, bring them to a wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. In the meantime, keep them in a warm, dark box in some toweling in a quiet location.

It is crucial with cottontail babies to bring them in only as a last resort. Baby rabbits have a high death rate when hand raised, due in great part to the stress of handling by humans. People are NOT doing the babies any favors by attempting to raise them themselves. It usually only ends in sadness and frustration. Again, they need special diets, care, and antibiotics if they are to have any chance at survival.

Also, when baby rabbits are about 5 inches long, they are totally on their own and away from their mother. These rabbits do not need to be brought in unless they are injured. (If you have to chase the rabbit to catch it, IT DOES NOT NEED TO BE RESCUED!!)

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## 1. BABY SQUIRRELS

These are often found after a nest has blown down from a storm. They are best placed into a box set at the base of the tree. The mother will usually come retrieve them when people are not around. Keep dogs, cats, and children away. It may be necessary to keep them overnight and try again the next day. It is best to call your local wildlife rehabilitator for instructions and advice as to if the baby needs to be brought in. If you are requested to bring in the baby, make sure you keep it in a warm and quiet area (usually in a box with towelling) until you can get it in.

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**Always remember the following:** 

1. A young animal's best chance for survival is to be raised by its natural mother. It is important to make every effort to try to return the young to its mother. ONLY after all efforts to reunite them have been exhausted should the orphan be removed from the wild. DO NOT try to raise the baby yourself.
2. All birds (except Pigeons, European Starlings, and House Sparrows) and most mammals are protected by law and it is illegal to have them in your possession without proper permits from the federal and state government.
3. Proper care and nutrition are crucial to the survival of the baby and any deficiency will more than likely cost the animal its life.
4. Baby animals easily imprint onto whoever is feeding them and steps are needed to prevent this. An animal that is imprinted on people cannot be released back into the wild and usually must be destroyed.

**NOTE:** We frequently have people bring in babies they have been trying to raise themselves that are now having problems. These animals often have metabolic and nerve problems from an improper diet. We can save many more if we get them in right away.

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## **Wild Animals As Pets?... Why the Answer is Always No**

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1. Young animals may seem tame but may become very aggressive and unpredictable as they get older.
  2. Captivity is not natural and is a constant stress to a wild animal.
  3. Wild animals carry many diseases that can be very harmful to people.
  4. Wild animals need to be examined by a veterinarian that has special knowledge and training in wildlife medicine.
  5. Wild animals need care by individuals knowledgeable about their specific needs (nutritional, behavioral, social, and environmental).
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## **Wild Animals Do NOT Make Good Pets**

from a handout by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA)

### **What Is A Wild Animal?**

A wild animal lives in natural environments and requires definite periods of conditioning and learning in the presence of its parents and peers. It has certain inborn behavior patterns and also requires learned behavior to survive in competitive natural environments.

### **Why Can't Humans Substitute for Natural Parents?**

It is virtually impossible for a wild animal to adapt to traditional household living. It is also impossible for pet owners to influence behavior patterns of wild animals or to predict when wild and often destructive behavior will occur.

### **Do Wild Animals Transmit Disease?**

A wild animal is especially dangerous in this regard, since an owner would have no way of knowing what diseases the animal had been exposed to in its

natural environment. Diseases such as rabies can have extremely lengthy incubation periods, lasting several weeks or even several months.

Wild animals harbor parasites which can be lethal, especially to infants and young children. Internal parasites such as ascarid worms, tapeworms, flukes, and protozoa can cause debilitating and often fatal diseases in humans, while external parasites such as ticks and fleas transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever, bubonic plague, and other serious diseases.

### **What Animals Do Make Good Pets?**

A pet is a domesticated animal that is kept for pleasure rather than utility. Domesticated animals make good pets because they have been bred, many for thousands of years, to coexist with humans in a household setting. In fact, behavior patterns which are especially appropriate for the domestic animal's existence in a human household are consciously selected by breeders. The following animals are recommended as pets: dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, domestic mice, domestic rats, budgies (parakeets), canaries, cockatiels, doves, pigeons, domestic ducks and geese, and tropical fish.

### **What About Zoos and Aquariums**

Zoos and aquariums were once places where disenchanted pet owners could unload their problem pets. Today, zoos and aquariums, through the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA), have established wildlife conservation as their highest priority. One way of increasing their efforts is to discourage the taking of animals from the wild by not accepting donations of pets.

Captive wild animals should be managed in a zoological park or aquarium by professional biologists and other specially trained persons.

Members of the AAZPA invite you to join them and learn about wild animals and the care provided them in zoological parks and aquariums.



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