

Injured and Orphaned Wildlife

Thousands of acres of wildlife habitat are being destroyed each year, forcing wild animals to look for places to live. Backyards, city parks, chimneys, attics, and other human dwellings become new wildlife sanctuaries in urban areas, placing wild animals closer to humans and pets. The number of animal-human conflicts increase, resulting in injury or death to many types of native wildlife. Baby animals are the most frequently “rescued” animals in this kind of situation. But the majority of these rescues are unnecessary and cause severe disadvantage to baby wildlife! No matter how good the clinical care, rescued orphans will never have natural parents to teach them survival skills, including fear of humans. In every case, the parents always know best. Often people will find baby birds or baby squirrels after a windy or stormy day, collect them, and transport them far away from where the parent is watching and waiting to save them. Some people even try to raise the orphans themselves on bread and water, or birdseed, which contain none of the nutrients they need to survive. Cow milk is especially toxic to every wild animal and will cause severe diarrhea and dehydration.

An animal is truly orphaned only if the parents have abandoned it. In most cases, if you follow these steps, the parents will continue to care for the babies:

Song Birds

First, determine if the baby is a nestling or fledgeling. Nestlings are tiny and featherless or have minute pin feathers which do little to protect them from the surrounding environment. Fledgelings are small models of the parents with fully developed primary and secondary feathers. It is a myth that the parents will have nothing to do with a baby once it has been touched by a human.

When nestlings are found, first try to place the babies back into the original nest. If this cannot be done, fashion a new nest for the babies out of anything, a basket or small bucket with holes in the bottom to let water drain out. Line the new nest with paper towel or straw and secure it as high up as possible very close to the original nest. The parents are probably watching you and will return to feed the babies only after you have left the area. You can watch the nest with a pair of binoculars to see if the parents return, but keep in mind, some parents disappear for long periods of time and return for only a minute to feed the babies before they leave again.

Usually, a fledgeling will be hopping around the base of a tree or in nearby bushes. These babies still need to be fed by their parents, but are exercising their flight muscles and learning to move like their parents. Their behavior may seem odd, but it is best to leave them alone and let the parents take care of them on the ground or in the bushes. Fledgelings should be observed for obvious injury: Is there a wing broken? Does it only use one leg? Keep pets inside because dog and cat saliva can be fatal to birds even if they receive only a small scratch. Babies that have been attacked by a cat need antibiotics immediately and should be taken to the vet even if no visible damage is done.

Only baby or adult birds that are visibly weak, injured, or in serious danger should be removed and transported to a licensed rehabilitator. DO NOT TRY TO FEED OR WATER THE BABY. Providing water to a baby bird could prove fatal if the bird inhales, or aspirates, the water. Even if the bird looks okay after being placed with a rehabilitator, it could develop pneumonia a few days later and could die. While transporting the baby, place it in an open, breathable container with a piece of cloth over the top. The dark box will reduce stress, which alone can kill some birds. Do not put food or open water containers in the box because these items may injure or kill the animal during transport. If you have a sealable water bottle or heating pad, you may fill the bottle with warm water or put the heating pad on low to keep a baby warm during transport. Babies need to be fed every 15 minutes to every hour, so get them to a rehabilitator as soon as possible. Federal and state permits are required to possess any kind of wildlife. Call the contacts on page 3 to find a licensed rehabilitator in your area.

Squirrels

Squirrels build leaf nests high in the trees where it is difficult to even see the nest. Often, squirrels will build two nests for each litter, so that if one is destroyed, the parents can move the babies to another nest in another tree. Squirrels are capable of retrieving their babies from the forest floor all by themselves if given time. The fall rarely hurts the babies, but injury is possible, so inspect the baby with as little handling as possible. If there is visible injury, or the baby is stone cold, take it to a rehabilitator. If the baby looks okay, leave it where you found it and walk away from the area, giving the parents a safe environment in which to retrieve their babies. **DO NOT TRY TO FEED OR WATER THE BABIES.**

Raccoons, Opossums, and Other Nocturnal Animals.

Often, humans will stumble upon a tree stump in which they find several baby raccoons tumbling out. For some reason, they feel the need to “rescue” these animals because they seem to be alone. Any baby raccoon that is removed under these circumstances should be put back immediately. Often the parents are close by or will return at night to retrieve babies that have fallen out of or ventured from the nest. If a den is destroyed, place the babies in a sheltered location close to the original den and the mother will find them after dark and relocate them to the alternate nest they have already built. Only babies that are visibly sick or injured should be taken to a rehabilitator. Baby possums that are found are usually just leaving mom for the first time to live on their own. Possums are amazingly versatile creatures and can survive in almost any location. It is best to leave young possums alone unless they are visibly sick (walking in circles) or injured. Adult female possums carry their very young babies inside their belly pouch. When adult possums are hit by cars, they should be checked to see if babies are inside the pouch. If they are, they should be placed inside a sock (mimicking the mother’s pouch) and kept warm until they reach a rehabilitator. These mammals often carry ticks and lice, so handling should be kept to a minimum. **DO NOT FEED OR WATER THESE ANIMALS.**

Bats and Skunks

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources recognizes two strains of rabies that occur in Michigan. The bat-strain and the skunk-strain of rabies can be transmitted to all wild mammals, but are most likely to occur in bats and skunks. The state of Michigan wildlife rehabilitation permit prohibits the possession and care of skunks and bats, although a scientific-educational permit may be obtained. Studies have shown that less than one half of one percent of the bats in Michigan will test positive for rabies, but many wildlife rehabilitators will not take bats because of the exaggerated danger involved in caring for them, and for the difficulty in rehabilitating them for independent survival in the wild. Although bat-strain rabies accounts for only 1-2 deaths in all of the United States each year, the slight possibility of disease transmission leads to unnecessary extirmination and exclusion of highly-beneficial bats. Baby bats are often found in attics, or near outside building walls. A quick look around should reveal the roost, and the baby can be hung back from where it fell. Bats will roost behind shutters or loose bark or any perpendicular surface that is protected from the environment. Use heavy gloves handling a baby bat and simply place it on the surface it fell from. If it falls again, it is probably sick or injured. It should be placed in a breathable container and taken to a rehabilitator who will accept bats. Adult bats that are sick or injured may be infected with rabies and should not be handled under any circumstances until you speak with a rehabilitator and receive instructions.

Deer

A doe will care for her newborn fawn by licking it clean after birth to erase all scent. She will nurse the fawn, then leave it curled up in tall grass while she disappears for a few hours. This allows the doe to feed herself and escape predators. Since the newborn fawn is still too weak to run strongly, its hiding place is the best possible defense from predators. The small, still, scentless form of the fawn can be undetected by predators passing through just feet away. This behavior causes many fawns to be abducted by humans because they are thought to be abandoned. If you find one, do not touch it or walk near it because the scent you leave behind can lead predators straight to the fawn.

Eastern Cottontail Rabbits

Young rabbits are fed only at night and are left alone during the day and the female will not be found in the nest with her babies. Most “rescued” babies will not survive unless given a specialized milk replacement formula that contains special gut bacteria necessary for digestion of food. The only way you can tell if a baby rabbit has truly been orphaned is if you see the mother die or if you must take the mother to a licensed rehabilitator. Baby rabbits leave the nest when they are only 3 weeks old. When the rabbit is about 5 inches long, its eyes are open, and the ears stand up, it is self-sufficient and does not need care from the mother. These young rabbits will not benefit from being “rescued” by humans. An adult injured cottontail should be handled with care. Fear of humans can throw the animal into shock even if the injury is non-life threatening. Throw a towel over the injured rabbit, secure the hind legs, and try to slide the rabbit into a cardboard box. Remove the towel as you secure the flaps of the cardboard box and place the towel over the gaps in the top. While transporting the animal, make sure your radio is off, and you remain very quiet.

Raptors

Follow the directions for song birds, but be extremely guarded handling adult raptors. Their talons have been responsible for irreversible nerve and tendon damage, resulting in loss of hand-use in experienced wildlife biologists.

WHEN TO RESCUE A BABY

- Bloody nose or mouth, unusual discharge from eyes or ears
- Bloating, diarrhea, or bloody urine
- Obvious wounds, abrasions, bruising, or swelling
- Unusual fur/feather loss; blood, oil, sticky substance on fur/feathers
- Fractured bones: look for animal not bearing weight on limb or limb is dangling or sticking out in abnormal direction, bird is supporting weight with a wing
- Central nervous system problems: animal walking in circles, unable to support head, unable to move legs, blindness
- Gasping, weezing, sneezing, or other respiratory problems
- Dehydration:
 - Mammals: gently pinch skin on baby’s back. If it returns to normal quickly, the baby is well hydrated. If the skin remains standing up in a “tent” the baby is dehydrated. You can perform this test on the skin of your hand for comparison.
 - Birds: are dehydrated if the keel (breast bone) is visible and the skin wrinkles when gently pushed aside.
 - Reptiles: are dehydrated if the eyes are sunken, or a turtle is unable to keep its body under water (it floats).
- Baby is cold to the touch
- Baby has visible parasites (ticks, fleas, mites, maggots, etc.)
- Baby has been brought home by cat or dog
- Parents and other siblings known to be dead
- Baby found in unusual situation (pool, shipment of goods, car engine, etc.)
- Baby is not responsive to human handling (doesn’t try to hop away or bite/scratch)
- Baby is alone for long period of time in “normal” situation (Know the biology of the animal!)

If at least one of the conditions above can be met, call a licensed rehabilitator for further instructions. The rehabilitator is going to be your best resource when it comes to rescuing animals. Always take care to protect yourself from possible disease or parasite exposure, and remember that wild animals should never be trusted like you would trust a pet. Even babies can bite or scratch without warning.

Wildlife Emergency Contacts

If you are not sure if an animal is orphaned or injured, call a rehabilitator for advice *before* interfering. If an animal is brought to you, ask for the name of the rescuer, their telephone number, address, exact location where it was found, and detailed circumstances of the rescue. Important information can be lost when an animal changes hands. Be sure to collect information about the animal that will be useful in treatment and so that the animal can be returned to the same area it came from. Also, the rescuer is often more than willing to help release the animal in the right location after successful treatment.

ONLY LICENSED WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS AND VETERINARIANS WITH DNR-ISSUED PERMITS CAN POSSESS WILDLIFE FOR REHABILITATION PURPOSES:

Allegan County: Leslie Warren (269) 685-8617 Specializes in white-tailed deer

Barry County: Dawn Koning, *Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Foundation.* (269) 945-3994

Calhoun County: Ann Fleming (269) 965-5189 Small mammals only

Eaton County: Louise Saegert, *Wildside Rehabilitation and Education Center.* (517) 663-6153

Ionia County: Alice Walter (616) 642-9509 No raccoons, skunks, or bats

Kalamazoo County: Karen Amsbury (269) 345-8569 Specializes in raptors & songbirds, No opossums or woodchucks

Linda Born (269) 671-5690, cell # (269) 584-0347 Hawks and owls only

Sharon Butler (269) 649-2028 No songbirds

Sara Harrison (269) 372-9080 Small mammals and reptiles only
Eve. phone: (269) 372-9080

Lori King (269) 383-5934 Small mammals and songbirds only

Judith Kleis (269) 552-2305 No rabbits or songbirds
Eve. phone: (269) 342-4464

Charles J. Mehne, DVM *Animal Clinic* (269) 344-5663 Raptors only
Eve. phone: (269) 342-2489

Kent County: Sjana Gordon (616) 897-6471

James Innis, DVM, *Weisner, Innis & Shoem, DVMS* (616) 363-3831
Eve. phone: (616) 364-7520

Peg Markle, *Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Ltd.* (616) 361-6109