

## ASSISTANCE FOR YOUNG WILDLIFE: Intervention or Interference?

In the spring, animal shelters and wildlife rehabilitators receive young wildlife in droves. Unfortunately, would-be rescuers may do more harm than good when they "assist" animals who are doing fine on their own.

When a juvenile bird or animal needs help, the most important thing you can do is contact a wildlife rehabilitator. Rehabilitators are trained to care for injured, ill, or orphaned wild animals with the goal of releasing them back into their natural habitat. Animal shelters and veterinary hospitals may also be qualified to house or hold wild animals and often work closely with rehabilitators.

Wild animals have very specific needs that the average person is not capable of providing for, and the routine care one would give a human or domestic animal can harm or even kill a wild animal. Don't attempt to feed any wild animal without knowing its proper diet; and trying to treat an injury or set a broken bone by yourself may make matters worse. Handling and caring for wild animals requires special training and experience, to prevent injury to the animals and to protect yourself from getting hurt by them.

To locate a wildlife rehabilitator, contact a local animal shelter, animal control agency, nature center, or state or country wildlife agency, or call a veterinarian who specializes in wildlife or exotic pets. You can also try contacting the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association ([nwra@nrawildlife.org](mailto:nwra@nrawildlife.org)) or the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council ([iwrc@inreach.com](mailto:iwrc@inreach.com)).

Determining whether a juvenile animal needs help isn't always easy. Examples of signs of illness or injury that warrant an immediate call to a rehabilitator include vomiting, diarrhea, bleeding, and an apparent broken limb or wing. An animal who is cool to the touch or who doesn't respond to touch is an animal in shock or hypothermic (low body temperature) and needs immediate medical assistance. Wildlife that appear "orphaned" may need assistance, but only under certain conditions. Some wild animals such as deer and rabbits may leave their offspring alone for long periods of time during the day; make sure the parent isn't going to return before you intervene. Keep dogs, cats, and children away from animal young while deciding what to do. Follow these guidelines when you see a juvenile animal on the ground:

- **Nestlings** are young birds who are naked or have just the beginnings of feathers. A nestling who has fallen out of the nest should be put back in the original nest or a makeshift one hung from a nearby tree branch as close to the original as possible. The makeshift nest should be made of a wicker or plastic berry basket padded with paper towels or fresh straw, so the nestling is tucked securely into the basket. If no parent returns by nightfall, call a rehabilitator or animal shelter for advice.
- **Fledglings** are young birds with full wing, tail, and body feathers and occasionally downy tufts on their heads; they are learning to fly and spend a great deal of time hopping on the ground. They are capable of short-distance flights, and the parent birds

are often heard or seen nearby. Fledglings should be left alone unless obviously sick or injured, or no parent birds are observed.

- **Squirrel young** need help if their eyes haven't opened yet or they are incompletely furred. Place a fallen squirrel in a partially covered box at the bottom of a tree and stay completely out of sight. If the mother doesn't retrieve the animal within a couple of hours or by dark, call a rehabilitator or animal shelter.

- **Juvenile rabbits** usually require no assistance if the nest area is intact and the parent is in the area. They are fed by the mother at dawn and dusk, so you are unlikely to actually see her. If you find furless young with closed eyes and ears, put them back in the nest, reform it if it has been disturbed, cover it with loose grass, and mark the top with an X made from sticks or other natural-colored material. If the marker is undisturbed the next day and the young rabbits have sunken abdomens, you can assume that the mother hasn't returned to feed them. Contact a rehabilitator or shelter for further advice before removing the young. If the rabbits are active and furred, with open eyes and erect ears, they are probably old enough to be on their own.

- **Fawns** are often left alone by their mothers for long periods of time during the day, hidden in tall grasses or brush. So unless a fawn is bleeding or looks physically injured, it is best to vacate the area so the mother will feel safe returning.

- **Opossum** young are carried in their mother's pouch until they are old enough to cling to her back. Occasionally, an opossum falls off but unless the juvenile is furless or shorter than seven inches (not including the tail), it's best to leave the animal alone. Many young opossums have been saved from certain death by bystanders who have retrieved them from their mother's pouch or the surrounding area after she has been hit by a car. If you find a dead adult female opossum with young in her pouch, contact a rehabilitator, who may recommend transporting the dead adult with the young to a rehabilitation facility to prevent injuring the young when attempting to remove them from the mother's nipples.

These guidelines can help you determine whether or not juvenile wildlife really need assistance. And remember: Before attempting to move a wild animal that you think needs help, call a wildlife rehabilitator or animal shelter first. They can tell you how to keep the animal safe, warm, and protected until you can get the appropriate help.