



Coexisting
with Wildlife
Fact Sheet #12

FUND FACTS

IS THE ANIMAL REALLY AN ORPHAN?

Is that cute, helpless baby wild animal really helpless? In spring and summer, people frequently find baby wild animals and assume they are orphaned. However, whether or not an animal is orphaned depends on the animal's age and species, and how their natural behaviors are perceived. For example, people sometimes assume that an animal found alone means the animal is orphaned. They don't realize that certain animals, like deer and rabbits, commonly leave their young alone to avoid attracting predators with their own scent. This is normal. Yet other animals, like raccoons, are closely supervised by their mothers, so finding a young raccoon alone does indicate that the animal is likely to be an orphan. Here are some tips to help you decipher if the animal you are seeing is truly an orphan, and what to do.

BIRDS

Q: Baby birds fell from their nest and I touched them – will the parents reject them now?

A: It's a myth that birds abandon their chicks if a person touches them. Unlike other animals, birds are not sensitive to the human scent. Just put the baby birds back in their nest if safe to



Photo: David Buck

do so. If the original nest was destroyed or is too high to reach, hang a wicker or woven stick basket close to where the original nest was. Woven stick baskets* make perfect substitute nests: they resemble natural nests and allow rain to pass through so the birds don't drown. However, make sure the basket isn't too deep - adult birds will not jump into anything they can't see out of. You should watch for an hour to make sure that the parent birds return to the new nest to feed their chicks. If they don't return, call your local fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator in your area.

*These are the kind of baskets that flower arrangements come in. They can be cheaply purchased at supermarket florist departments or garden stores. Many people already have them around the house.

Q: There's a bird outside that can't fly. Is he injured?

A: If it's summertime and the bird is almost full-sized, fully feathered, but has short tail feathers, he may be a fledgling. Often birds leave the nest several days before they are able to fly. This is normal, as birds learn to fly from the ground up. Stand back and look for parent birds who will fly over to feed their fledgling a few times per hour. For several days, the fledgling may remain on the ground but the parents will supervise and teach their young how to hunt for food- so it is very important to leave the fledgling

there! Be sure to keep your companion animals indoors during this period. If there are stray cats or dogs in the area whom you can't control, put the fledgling in a basket and hang the basket securely from a nearby tree limb. Hopefully, this will keep the bird off the ground for the few extra days he needs before he can fly. However, if the bird appears injured and/or alone, or in imminent danger, contact your state fish and game agency right away to locate a wildlife rehabilitator.

DEER

Q: I found a fawn all alone – is he orphaned?

A: People mistakenly assume that a fawn is orphaned if found alone. Rest assured that the mother deer is nearby. The doe will only visit and nurse her fawn a few times a day to avoid attracting predators. At four weeks old, the fawn will begin to travel with his mother. Just leave the fawn alone unless you know that the mother is dead. Mother deer are wary of human smells; if you have already handled the fawn, take a towel, rub it in the grass, and then wipe down the fawn to remove all human scent. Using gloves, promptly return the fawn to where he was found.

However, if the fawn is lying on his side, or wandering and crying incessantly, he may be orphaned. If this is the case, call your local



Photo: Animal Trust Sanctuary

fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator near you. But remember, a fawn found alone and quiet is OK!

FOXES

Q: I see fox kits playing by themselves – but no parent is around. Are they orphaned?

A: Often fox kits will appear unsupervised for long periods of time while both parents are out hunting for food. Observe the kits from a distance. If they seem energetic and healthy, just leave them alone. Only contact your state fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator if the kits appear sickly or weak, or if you have reason to believe both parents are dead.

OPOSSUMS

Q: I found a baby opossum – is he orphaned?

A: Baby opossums are born as embryos, barely larger than a bee. They crawl up to their mother's pouch where they spend about 2 months attached to one of her 13 nipples. Sometimes when baby opossums get to be about 3-4 inches long, they ride around on mother's back – if they fall off, she may not know they are missing. The general rule is if the opossum is less than 7 inches long (without the tail) he is an orphan. Over 7 inches long, he's old enough to be on his own!

RABBITS

Q: I found a nest of baby rabbits. Are they orphaned?

A: If the nest is intact and the babies are not injured, leave them alone! Mother rabbits only visit their young 2-3 times a day to avoid attracting predators. If the nest has been disturbed, or if you think the babies are orphaned, recover the nest with surrounding natural materials, such as grass, leaves and fur, and put an "X" of sticks or yarn over the nest to assess if the mother is returning to nurse her young. If the "X" is moved but the nest is still covered by the next day, the mother has returned to nurse them. If the "X" remains undisturbed for 24 hours, call your fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator near you. It



is vital to keep all cats and dogs **OUT** of the area because they will surely find and kill the helpless young rabbits. Try not to touch the babies because mother rabbits are very sensitive to foreign smells and may abandon their young.

Q: My cat caught a rabbit (or bird). What should I do?

A: Unfortunately, one of the main causes of orphaning in rabbits and birds is free roaming cats. If the rabbit (or bird) has any puncture wounds, bring the animal to a veterinarian or rehabilitator quickly. Cats have toxic bacteria in their saliva that becomes lethal unless the victim is put on antibiotics immediately. A tiny, almost imperceptible wound caused by a cat's tooth can be fatal if a vital organ is punctured. A rehabilitator or veterinarian should start the animal on antibiotics ASAP.

Only if the animal is definitely unharmed should he be released.

People can save hundreds of wild animals by keeping their cats indoors, especially in the spring and summer when wild animals have helpless babies. If you won't keep your cat(s) indoors, you need to use multiple-bell collars that will alert some wild animals to the cat's presence. One bell is not loud enough. Pet supply stores sell a variety of breakaway collars, but you should purchase two additional large bells (sold separately with s-hooks) and attach them to the cat's collar. Stealthy cats learn how to keep one bell still – that's why at least two bells per collar are needed.

SKUNKS

Q: There's a baby skunk running around by day. Is the baby orphaned?

A: It's possible, yet it is more likely that the skunk has lost sight of the mother. Watch to see if the baby finds the den or if the mother retrieves him. You can put a plastic laundry basket upside down over the skunk to temporarily contain him while waiting for the mother to return. Approach the skunk slowly and talk softly. If the skunk gives a warning by stamping his front feet, then stand still or back off. You can approach again after the skunk calms down. As baby skunks get older, they sometimes come out to explore while the mother is away. Most of the time, however, they don't appear without her – so if you repeatedly see the baby outside alone, he may be orphaned. If the skunk appears to be truly orphaned, contact your fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.



Photo: David Buck



SQUIRRELS

Q: There's a baby squirrel outside under a tree – is he orphaned?

A: If tree work was recently done and the nest or baby fell down as a result, give the mother a chance to reclaim her young. If the baby fell from the tree uninjured, leave him where he is, leave the area and

the baby isn't fully furred, provide him with a heat source, such as a heating pad or a hot water bottle.

RACCOONS

Q: There's a baby raccoon outside wandering around – is he orphaned?

A: If the baby raccoon has been seen alone for more than a few



Photo: Animal Trust Sanctuary

keep people and companion animals away. Monitor from a safe distance; if the baby is not retrieved by night-time, contact your fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator near you. If there is a risk of predation, you can put the squirrel in a wicker basket and attach the basket securely to the tree. Do not cover the squirrel with leaves or blankets because the mother may not be able to find him. If it is chilly outside, or if

hours, he has probably lost his mother, since mother raccoons closely supervise their young and don't let them out of their sight. You can put an upside down laundry basket over the baby (with a weight on top) and monitor for a few hours. Ask around to see if anyone in the neighborhood trapped an adult raccoon or saw one hit by a car. Contact your local fish and game agency to locate a licensed wildlife rehabilitator near you if the mother does not return.

A WORD ABOUT TRAPPING

Please note that the live trapping of "nuisance" wildlife often leads to wild animal babies being unintentionally orphaned. This is because spring and summer are when many wild animals attempt to use chimneys, attics, and outbuildings as sites in which to raise their young. It may seem like a kind solution to trap and relocate a wild animal, but a high mortality rate among relocated animals, and orphans being left behind to starve, are the all-too-frequent results. We strongly discourage the trapping of wildlife for these reasons.

For assistance with wildlife conflicts, feel free to contact our wildlife hotline at (203) 393-1050 or visit www.fund.org and click on "Urban Wildlife." Here you can find our "Coexisting with Wildlife" fact sheets, which are grouped by species and give humane, effective, long-lasting solutions to common wildlife problems. ♻️