

Cottontail Rabbits

Cottontail rabbits hide their nests in plain view in the middle of a lawn, in brush piles, or long grass. It is not surprising then, that cottontail nests are frequently disturbed by mowing, raking, or digging by dogs or cats.

If the baby bunnies are not sick or injured, return them to the nest if you can find it. Look for a shallow depression lined with grass or fur. Place the babies in the nest and cover them with a light layer of dry grass to hide them.



Image by Rusty Clark

If the nest has been destroyed, reconstruct the nest using dried grasses, hay, and straw. Dig a shallow hole about 3 inches (7.6 cm) deep and use as much of the original material as you can recover, including the mother's fur. Ideally a nest should be made in the exact same place, but nests can be moved to a safer location up to 10 feet (3 m) away from the original site.

Leave the area or the mother will not return.

- Although you can watch from a distance, rabbit milk is very rich and mother cottontails only feed their young once or twice daily.
- To determine if the mother is returning, create a tic-tac-toe pattern over the nest with straw, grasses or tiny twigs or place a piece of string across the nest. Wait 24 hours to see if the twigs have been disturbed. It is possible for the mother to feed her young without disturbing the pattern much, check the babies if you're unsure. If the bunnies appear healthy & warm, then the mother is coming back.

Baby bunnies are incredibly difficult to hand-raise, and many do not survive even in the care of an experienced wildlife rehabilitator. **A baby bunny's best chance of survival is always with its mother.**

Baby bunnies also grow up very quickly, and juvenile cottontails are entirely on their own by the time they are 4 inches (10 cm) long with open eyes and erect ears.

If the bunnies are injured or if you are certain the mother has not returned, please contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Even if you cannot bring the babies to receive professional care immediately, **DO NOT** attempt to feed them without consulting with a rehabilitator for instructions first.



Image by Chief Trent.

Fawns

If you find a fawn alone, do not assume that it has been abandoned. Does often leave their fawns to forage during the day, and fawns are used to being separated from their mothers for long time periods of time.



Image by USFWS Pacific

Nature has given fawns adaptations to survive until adulthood.

Fawns are able to stand within one hour of birth. By the age of 1 month, fawns can outrun many predators.

- Their dappled coloring allows them to blend into their environment to avoid predator detection.

If you find a fawn alone, leave the baby there and vacate the area since the mother will not return if people or pets are present. The fawn should be removed only if the baby appears cold, hungry, injured, sick, or if its safety is threatened.

When Does a Baby Animal Need Medical Attention?

A baby animal should only be removed from its parents if...

- It is sick or injured.
- You know for a fact that the mother is dead.
- There is absolutely no way to return the baby animal to its nest, den, or hiding place.
- If presented by a dog, or particularly a cat, a professional should probably evaluate a baby animal even if it does not appear to be injured. The bacteria in cat mouths can quickly prove lethal.

Wild animals—just like family pets—require professional care when they are sick or injured. If you find a sick or injured animal, contact a local wildlife rehabilitator (*see NWRA below*) for help as soon as possible.

Transporting Injured Wildlife

DO use a towel or pillowcase to cover the animal, and then scoop it up gently.

DO contain and transport injured wildlife in a secure container like a cardboard box with a lid.

- Pet carriers may be used for larger animals.
- Punch a few air holes in the tops and sides of the box.
- Place a towel or paper towels on the bottom so the animal is not on a slippery surface.

If you are unable to transport the animal immediately...

DO contact a local wildlife rehabilitator (*see NWRA below*) to determine the condition of the animal and what, if any, food would be appropriate.

DO NOT handle the animal, or look at it any more than is absolutely necessary.

DO place the container in a warm, dark, quiet place—away from pets, children, and noise to reduce stress and prevent further injury

While transporting this frightened wild animal in your vehicle, keep the carrier out of the sun and away from direct air conditioning. Keep the car radio off and keep talking to a minimum.

Conclusion

A juvenile animal's best chance of survival is always with its parents. If you see a wild animal that appears to be sick or injured, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator immediately for advice. Many young animals that appear to be orphaned are not.

People that work with wildlife have a term for a baby animal that is mistakenly believed to be an orphan: "Kidnap Victim". Although this term is often used in a joking manner, the situation is far from funny. Baby cottontail rabbits that could easily be replaced in the nest are needlessly presented for hand raising, and many of these bunnies do not survive.

What can you do to prevent young animals from becoming truly orphaned or injured?

- Keep your dog on a leash or closely supervised.
- Do not allow your house cat to roam outside.
- Reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides such as lawn chemicals.

Further Reading

House Rabbit Society. FAQ: Orphaned Baby Bunnies. Available at <http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/orphan.html>. Accessed on March 18, 2013.

Humane Society of the United States. Found an Injured or Orphaned Animal? Available at http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/injured_orphaned_wildlife.html. Accessed on March 18, 2013.

NWRA. Finding a rehabilitator. National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association website. Available at <http://www.nrawildlife.org/content/finding-rehabilitator>. Accessed on March 18, 2013.