



STEVEN MARTIN

BY DAWN WEBB

If You Leave

FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS my home has been a shelter for orphaned and injured wildlife. I am a licensed wildlife rehabilitator in Delaware, and like my colleagues in the field, my house is overrun with wild animal babies in the spring. Five-gallon buckets lined with dirt and grass house young cottontails, dog kennels hold baby raccoons and old rabbit hutches scattered throughout the woods contain immature squirrels.

Most of the critters I receive are “found” by people. These well-meaning Good Samaritans bring dozens of wild animal babies to my door every spring – young animals that they believe have been abandoned.

Take my word for it, in almost every case, these animals should be left where they are found. Rarely are young wild animals orphaned. So it’s almost certain that while you may see a baby animal alone, what you don’t see is its mother,



DAWN WEBB

Like this fawn, most animals that come to wildlife rehabilitators in Delaware are “rescued” by well-meaning people who think the animals have been abandoned.

who is most likely nearby and waiting for you to move on.

An “abandoned” fawn

A case in point: in June of last year, my cell phone rang and the gentleman on the other end was frantically telling me about a fawn he found. “The mother left it,” he said. I took a deep breath. Experience has taught me to listen first, and then ask questions.

“It’s in my motor home and it’s freaking out,” the man added for emphasis. He told me that he and his friends were on their way to a NASCAR race at Dover International Speedway when they spotted the fawn alone on the side of a road. With all good intentions, they

Wildlife rehabilitator feeds a gray fox kit that was abandoned. Unlike this one, most young animals that may appear to be abandoned are not – their mothers are usually nearby.

stopped and picked it up.

Like this example, most of the animals that come to wildlife rehabilitators in Delaware are “rescues.” Others come from veterinarians, the SPCA, or state law enforcement officers. More than 2,500 birds and mammals are brought to wildlife rehabilitators for care each year in Delaware.

But no matter how an animal arrives, our job is to help wildlife taken from the wild to return there. Wildlife rehabilitators are volunteers who donate their time, money and skills to help make that happen. It requires knowledge, understanding, patience, people skills, patience, and a caring heart. Did I mention patience?

So please help us out! If you or your children are out in the woods or in your backyard and you come across a baby animal, please remember this simple phrase: if you care, leave them there. Here’s another: when in doubt, call a wildlife rehabilitator from the Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators.

But when exactly should you call?

Injuries

Wild animals should never be taken from the wild unless you’re certain they have been injured or orphaned. If it’s obvious that an animal is injured, extreme care should be taken. This is true especially if it’s necessary for you to handle an animal to remove it from harm’s way or to transport it to a wildlife rehabilitator.

Wild animals in pain are unpredictable and dangerous. In addition, those baby rabbits, skunks, raccoons, foxes, squirrels and bats might be carrying

parasites including ticks, fleas and lice. They could also be carrying rabies, Lyme disease, distemper or other illnesses that could affect you or your pets.

In 2008, a total of 258 animals were tested for rabies in Delaware. Of those, 19 tested positive, including cats, raccoons, bats, a fox and one domestic rabbit.

Wildlife rehabilitators provide trained care for injured wild creatures and can offer advice for people encountering any situation whether in your backyard, while enjoying an outdoor activity, or traveling on any of our state roadways.

The hard truth is, if you take a young animal from the wild, you are almost certainly ensuring its death. Most young animals and birds will die from an inappropriate diet and improper care. If returned to the wild after even just a few days of captivity, death usually occurs quickly, since the animal or bird will not have learned the skills it needs to survive in the wild.

So if you come upon an animal you believe is injured, contact a wildlife rehabilitator who has the experience to evaluate the situation. That’s the best way to save its life.

Abandoned animals

Baby animals are orphaned or abandoned when their mother is killed or gravely injured. Abandonment also occurs when parents are harassed or their habitat is threatened.

Care, Them There



LEIGH ANNE GOULET

If you come across a baby animal, like this fox kit, remember this phrase: if you care, leave them there.

Over the past 10 years thousands of acres of vital wildlife habitat have disappeared completely in Delaware, displacing wildlife and pushing the animals into smaller and more fragmented areas – including our backyards.

In 2007, this young red fox (right) was wounded in a trap. Wildlife rehabilitator Cathy Martin worked with Dover veterinarians Craig Stonesifer and Karen Usselman to provide emergency care, including this splint. The fox wore the splint for several weeks.

After a few more weeks in recovery, the splint was removed and the fox was released back into the wild (below).



KEITH CLANCY



KEITH CLANCY

Raccoons, for example, have become a major complaint in urban areas throughout the state. An unsecured trash can is a picnic basket to a raccoon. And when you place food outside for pets you're inviting trouble right up to your back door.

Birds

Will a bird abandon its young if you've touched them? No! Except for turkey vultures, birds have no sense of smell and are not affected by human scent.

When baby birds fledge from their nests, the parents will continue to feed

them while on the ground. At the same time they teach them to forage for themselves naturally.

Concerned people gather the young birds up thinking they're helpless. In reality, they are not. Again, when in doubt, contact an animal rehabilitator.

Rabbits

Eastern cottontail rabbits have the highest rate of abandonment in the wildlife world. Unfortunately, they are also the species most commonly believed to be orphaned. When taken from the nest, the survival rate of baby cottontails in captivity is just 30 percent. So it's important to understand some basic facts before you act.

The female cottontail rabbit will dig a shallow hole in the ground, line it with her fur, give birth, cover the babies and then move off to a safe distance so predators aren't lured to the nest. She returns



LEIGH ANNE GOULET

Don't assume a baby bird is abandoned just because it's on the ground and seems to be by itself. When baby birds fledge, their parents will feed them while on the ground, while teaching them to forage for themselves naturally.



TONY PRATT

What to Do If You Find an Orphaned Baby Wild Animal

FIRST TRY TO LOCATE THE NEST. If it appears to be a safe place, put the animal back. Be sure to wear gloves for your protection. It is always best for the mother to raise her own young. The mother will continue to care for her young, even after you've touched them. If you cannot locate the nest or if you cannot reach it, call a wildlife rehabilitator.

If the baby animals are in bad condition or the mother is dead, call a wildlife rehabilitator.

If you find a nest of rabbits, do not immediately assume that they are abandoned. The mother feeds her young once or maybe twice a day. A mother rabbit will leave her young and forage for food for most of the day. If you find a nest, keep all pets away and watch from a discrete distance. If the mother does not return to the nest by the next day, call a wildlife rehabilitator.



Cottontail rabbits like these are the species most commonly believed to be orphaned. If you come upon a nest, you can be almost certain that mother will return, even though it may take several hours.



DAWN WEBB

Some Do's and Don'ts for Handling a Baby Animal

DON'T

1. Allow children to handle or cuddle them
2. Let pets near them
3. Attempt to feed them unless you first speak to a wildlife rehabilitator
4. Give the animal any medication
5. Try to raise them yourself. It is against the law in Delaware

DO

1. Wear gloves
2. Find a sturdy secure container (like a cardboard box) and line the bottom with a towel
3. Use another towel to transfer the animal into the container
4. Locate the container in a dark, quiet place
5. For warmth, find a bottle with a tight fitting lid, fill it with warm water, wrap it with a cloth, and place it in the box with the baby animals. **DO NOT USE A HEATING PAD!**

Call a wildlife rehabilitator!

What you do in the first hour could determine if the orphaned animal will survive or not.

only to feed them a few times during the evening.

At one week of age the small rabbits open their eyes and begin nibbling on the grass around their nest. At three weeks, they start coming out of the nest to frolic and forage for solid food. They return to the nest only to meet mom for feeding time. At five weeks they are totally on their own; mom is tending a new litter nearby.

People who find a seemingly unattended rabbit nest in the middle of the day may watch for an hour or two and then decide that the babies have been abandoned. A true Good Samaritan however, will contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who will ask questions to determine if the babies can be returned to the nest, and offer other advice.

For example, here is a simple test to determine whether a mother cottontail is returning to the nest. Drape two strings or pieces of yarn - each about a foot long - in an X-shape over the top of the nest. Leave it alone through the evening and morning hours. If the string is still in the same shape when checked the next day, the mother is not returning. But 99 percent of the time, the X-shape will be

missshapen because the mother has come back to feed her young.

Fawns

The end of May marks the beginning of the fawning season in Delaware, with most fawns born during the last week of May through the first week of June. Because of the natural behavior of fawns and their mothers, casual observers can easily mistake a fawn alone for a fawn abandoned. Trying to "save" it can do more harm than good.

If you see a fawn by itself, keep some facts in mind before you consider trying to help it. Newborn fawns are "hidlers;" they do not flee from people. Meanwhile, mom is only a short distance away and will only seek her fawn out when it's time to nurse - and nursing times may be as long as 10 hours apart.

Here's some good news: if a fawn removed from the wild is returned quickly enough - within 24 hours - the doe will usually find her fawn and the family will be reunited.

The fawn in the camper

This is exactly what happened to the fawn that was "saved" by the guys in the



STEVEN MARIN

Even though their enclosure is actually larger, these abandoned young gray foxes huddle together for warmth. They were successfully returned to the wild by a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.



TONY PRATT

When kept as “pets” wild animals like squirrels lose their identity but never their wild instincts. This makes it impossible for them to ever survive in the wild.

camper. Yes, this story - unlike most - has a happy ending. The guys and I took the fawn back and placed it in the exact spot where it was found. The guys returned to the track for the race while I sat patiently in wait. The doe did return and mother and baby happily blended into the marsh together.

As a wildlife rehabilitator, I love endings like this one. Delawareans who come across baby animals that seem to be injured or abandoned can help us create more stories with happy endings. Just remember, if you encounter a wild creature and it's clearly evident that it cannot care for itself, you should contact someone trained to handle the situation: a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Don't compromise the health of any wild animal by taking it in and feeding it incorrectly. Malnutrition results quickly

Another reason to leave wild animals where they are: it's illegal to keep them!

MANY PEOPLE are unaware that it is against the law to keep wildlife in Delaware (and in most other states). Both federal and state laws make it illegal to have or sell native wildlife, or to possess any game species or endangered species. The same is true for birds; the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act makes it illegal to keep any migratory bird, songbird, waterfowl or bird of prey. So unless you are a licensed wildlife rehabilitator or possess a scientific collection permit, you are not allowed to keep wildlife.

The only exceptions to these rules in Delaware are some species of reptiles and amphibians. You are allowed to possess one individual of the more common species, such as a bull frog or a painted turtle, as long as they are not taken from state lands, including parks. However, if you capture a turtle - or any other reptile or amphibian - and keep it 30 days or longer, you are required to keep it permanently. That's the law.

Keep in mind, also, that the same dismal fate likely awaits most reptiles and amphibians that we might capture and keep. Most will probably not survive for long.



LAURA MADARA

and the animal will suffer and die. When kept as “pets,” wild animals become desensitized to human presence. But while they lose their identity, they never lose their wild instincts. This makes it impossible for them to ever survive in the wild. Unfortunately, that means that if we can’t find a suitable wildlife organization to accommodate their care, they will have to be euthanized.

So, please – if you care, leave them there. **OD**

DAWN WEBB IS CURATOR OF THE DUPONT NATURE CENTER, WITH DNREC’S DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE. SHE IS ALSO A LICENSED WILDLIFE REHABILITATOR AND CHARTER MEMBER OF THE DELAWARE COUNCIL OF WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS AND EDUCATORS, A VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION.

Want to learn more about helping wildlife and what to do should you encounter a wild animal? Join the Delaware Council of Wildlife Rehabilitators and Educators for a series of educational presentations.

- April 4, 2009, from 2:00 – 3:30 p.m. at Lums Pond State Park Nature Center in Bear. Seating is limited so please pre-register by calling 302-368-6989.
- April 6, 2009, from 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. in the DNREC auditorium in Dover.
- April 16, 2009, from 6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. at the Sussex Cooperative Extension office on Route 9 in Georgetown.
- April 17, 2009, from 6:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. at the Abbotts Mill Nature Center, 15411 Abbott’s Pond Road in Milford.

For more information contact Dawn Webb at 302-422-1329.

Who to Call: Licensed Wildlife Rehabilitators in Delaware

New Castle County:

Hilary Taylor: 302-834-4604
Bonnie Kruch (reptiles only): 302-378-4761

Kent County:

Catherine Martin: 302-653-2887, Ext. 106 (Days)
..... 302-674-9131 (Evenings)
Dawn Webb: 302-422-1329 (Days)
..... 302-530-5605 (Evenings)
Claudette Dean: 302-674-4838
Terri Cole: 302-739-4771 (Days)
..... 302-335-2547 (Evenings)
Mary Thomas (rabbits): 302-674-5644

Sussex County:

Bob Hughes: 302-227-2084 or 302-227-2463 (Lewes Area)

Birds

Tri-State Bird Rescue: 302-737-9543

Exotic Animals

Department of Agriculture; Poultry and Animal Health: 302-698-4561

Stranded Marine Mammals

MERR Institute: 302-228-5029

SPCA

New Castle County: 302-998-2281
Kent County: 302-698-3006
Sussex County: 302-856-6361

Dead Animals on the Road

New Castle County: 302-323-1111
Kent County: 302-739-1111
Sussex County: 302-855-1111

Rabies 24-hour Hotline 302-744-4545

Operation Game Theft (Poaching) 1-800-292-3030

DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife

Director’s Office: 739-9910
Wildlife Section: 739-9912
Enforcement Section: 739-9913
Fisheries Section: 739-9914