

***Ask the Vet:* Caution in Interfering with Baby Wildlife**

By Nancy Irvine, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

The season has come when we will begin crossing paths with young wildlife as we play in the yard, venture into the garden and hike in the fields and woods.

Most often our best effort to help young wildlife is to watch from a distance and avoid interfering. Occasionally, lending a hand can be helpful, especially when the hand offered is that of an expert or at least one who is thoughtfully knowledgeable.

Every year, our veterinary team receives desperate phone calls from well-intentioned people wondering how they can help a baby bunny who seems to have no mother or a baby bird that has fallen from its nest. We appreciate these calls, because we all are on the same team when we want to help wildlife.

It is in the best interest of the seemingly helpless baby bunnies and birds that we all first make sure that any intervention we perform makes sense for the species we are trying to help. Seeking advice is the best first step so that intended help does not end up being harm.

Some of the most common encounters with baby wildlife illustrate how wild animal parenting techniques differ remarkably from our human parenting. Baby cottontail bunnies are nursed and nurtured by their mothers only at night. The mother rarely spends time on her nest during the day.

Chances are that when you find a nest of tiny bunnies without a mother, the mother probably is not far away and the nest should be left alone. When a single bunny is found with open eyes and upright ears, the bunny is old enough to be on his own. The best help you can offer bunnies in these situations is to keep cats, dogs and other potential predators away from the area.

Recognizing the difference between a normal and content white-tailed fawn versus one that is distressed depends on some quiet observation. A resting, quiet fawn found alone likely is normal. Mother deer often leave their fawns alone to draw predators away from their baby. A fawn in distress is likely to be vocalizing and wandering.

Baby squirrels and raccoons work through a learning curve to learn to climb, jump and hold on effectively in the trees. Falls are expected. Their mothers will retrieve them if given privacy and time.

Baby birds with no feathers or only a down covering that fall from their nest may require help getting back into their nest. If you gently return the baby bird to its nest, your scent will not disturb the mother bird.

A feathered baby is learning to fly and should be left alone. All of these baby acrobats also are served well by having protection from predators. Wildlife young learn very quickly, so your protection efforts will be needed only for a short time.

When you feel that you have found a distressed or injured wild animal, it is best to seek the experienced guidance of a licensed rehabilitator. Survival of wild animals in the care of humans is tremendously better when the animal is moved to the rehabilitator without delay.

Veterinarians and animal hospital teams have varying amounts of experience with wildlife species. Be aware that the laws of Ohio regulate care and intervention with wildlife species regardless of whether you are a veterinarian.

Some veterinarians may have an agreement with a licensed rehabilitator such that the veterinarian can provide care and housing to the wild animal under the license of the rehabilitator. This arrangement often works best to help an animal to receive the initial examination and help that it needs before moving to the rehabilitator's facility.

You can visit the Ohio Wildlife Rehabilitators Association website (www.owra.org) to find a licensed rehabilitator nearby. The website lists rehabilitators by county and describes the types of services offered.

You will be rewarded when you take a wild animal in need to a competent rehabilitator. It always is tempting to try heroics on your own for such cute wild babies in need. It is much better to see them live with proper care.

If you really have a fascination for helping wildlife, then you should consider offering some of your time as a volunteer with a rehabilitator. Then you can see the adorable babies and learn more than you can imagine.