



Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Wildlife Fact Sheet

TOPIC: Keep Wildlife Wild

Spring is filled with new life in Wisconsin's great outdoors. It is also the time of year that we receive numerous questions and inquiries about young animals that seem to be orphaned, injured, or in need of help. The following is a brief guide to help navigate through these situations.

How can I tell if an animal is orphaned?

Most of the young animals encountered in the wild are not orphaned or abandoned. Their mother may be hidden nearby or has gone to find food and will return shortly, so the best policy is to leave these animals alone. Below are a few examples of the natural habits of several common Wisconsin species which you may encounter.

Eastern Cottontail Rabbit Cottontails only feed their young at dawn and dusk so the mother will rarely be at her nest during the day. A rabbit nest is a small depression in the ground, lined and covered with dried grass and fur. The young rabbits grow quickly and at two to three weeks old will start to leave the nest for short periods of time to nibble on grass. They are weaned from their mother at four weeks old. If a small rabbit is seen outside of a nest with its eyes open, ears standing up, and is at least 4-5 inches long, the rabbit is most likely on its own, and human intervention is not needed.

Raccoons and Squirrels Both squirrels and raccoons nest in trees. Squirrels will use tree cavities or build a nest out of leaves. A raccoon will also nest in tree cavities as well as in caves, brush piles, rock crevices, and under porches or decks, in chimneys, and in buildings. Mothers of both species will retrieve their young if they fall out of or wander away from the nest.

Opossum Young opossum do not leave the mother's pouch until two months of age. At four months of age, when they are approximately seven to nine inches from snout to rump, they leave the mother and are independent.

White-Tailed Deer Fawns will move very little their first few weeks. Fawns can walk shortly after birth but won't begin to follow their mother until about one month of age. They avoid detection by predators by having almost no scent and using their spotted coats for camouflage. During this time the mother is not in constant contact with the fawn. The mother will often leave her fawn alone, but will return often to nurse. By being in a different area, the mother may also be diverting a predator's attention away from the fawn.

Mallard Ducklings are often seen when the mother is leading them from their nest site to water. The downy ducklings are never more than a few feet away from their mother. The hen will stay with her brood until the young are able to fly, approximately two months after hatching.

Songbirds and Birds of Prey Nestlings, which are either naked or covered with down, sometimes fall out of the nest. If the nest is still intact and easily accessible use gloves to place the bird back in its nest. Birds generally have a poor sense of smell and minimal handling will not cause abandonment. Fledglings are feathered but not expert fliers yet. At this age they may leave the nest and hop along branches or the ground as they build strength and learn to fly.

How can I prevent animals from becoming orphaned?

There are several ways to help protect young animals:

- Check for their nests before cutting down or pruning trees, cutting brush, or mowing. If possible, farmers should push back the spring cutting of hayfields until July 15th to help protect grassland nesting birds and waterfowl.
- Keep pets indoors or on a leash to prevent injury to wildlife.
- Place caps on chimneys and vents to prevent animals from nesting there.
- Place covers on window wells to prevent baby animals from falling into them.
- Don't trap and remove adult animals during the spring, summer and early fall. Removing a mother animal would cause her young to become orphans.
- Slow down when driving and keep your eyes open for wildlife, especially at dawn and dusk.
- Educate children to respect wild animals and not to harass or catch them. If they find a baby animal they should not touch it, but should immediately tell an adult.

For more information or to speak with a professional about a specific situation, contact the WDNR's Call Center (1-888-WDNRINFO / 936-7463) or visit dnr.wi.gov and search "keep wildlife wild".

What is the law on assisting wildlife?

Other than a few species which are allowed to be possessed without a license, no person may possess live native wild animals without a license or permit from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). A permit from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is also required to possess all native birds protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. If it is absolutely necessary to help a young animal that is injured, truly orphaned, or in need of human intervention, first contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator in your area. To get the name of a wildlife rehabilitator in your area, contact the DNR's Call Center (1-888-WDNRINFO / 936-7463). You can also visit the DNR's online directory of licensed wildlife rehabilitators at dnr.wi.gov, search "rehab". A person may legally have the animal in their possession for up to 24 hours for the purpose of transporting the animal to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, veterinarian, or for release in a more appropriate location.

Is there a risk associated with assisting wildlife?

Some of the wildlife encountered can transmit diseases or parasites to humans. Even young animals can bite or cause injury, which is how many diseases can be transmitted to humans. The best way to protect yourself and the animal is to avoid direct contact. For more information about diseases visit dnr.wi.gov and search "wildlife health".

Remember: A young animal's best chance for survival is with its mother!

Most young wild animals that seem abandoned do not need help. Wild animals take care of their young in a variety of ways, and what may look like unusual behavior to you is just a normal part of the animal's strategy for survival. A young animal should never be removed from the wild unless absolutely necessary.