

ORPHANED WILDLIFE

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Wildlife in the West Point area have successfully raised their offspring for thousands of years without the need of assistance from people. And yet, every year well-meaning individuals with good intentions interfere in nature's ways.

Each spring and summer, countless people come across "abandoned" or "orphaned" baby animals that must be "rescued" from the wild and "almost certain death". These individuals scoop up the baby animals, take them home, and attempt to raise the baby animals as well as the animals' natural mothers.

This action is filled with misconceptions about wild animals and how they survive. It also has the potential for serious consequences for both the "rescuers" and the animals "being rescued".

First of all, baby animals are almost NEVER abandoned by their parents. They are left unattended for hours at a time, but this is for their own survival. If the animal's parents were constantly in attendance, a predator could easily locate the parents and kill and eat the baby animal; and, a predator might also kill and eat the parents at the same time. Raccoons are known to leave their kits unattended in the woods for up to two days at a time. Cottontail rabbits will only visit their baby rabbits twice a day for 15-20 minutes each visit. So, just because you find a baby animal and do not see an adult animal nearby doesn't mean that the young animal is not being taken care of.

Another common "rescue mission" involves baby birds that have "fallen out of the nest". Only if the baby bird is covered solely with downy feathers is it likely that the bird fell out of the nest. If that is the case, you can locate the nest and put the bird back. Contrary to popular thought, handling a baby bird with human hands will not cause the parents to abandon the infant bird. Birds have a poorly developed sense of smell and would never notice any lingering human scent.

Usually though, a young bird is found that has most of its feathers but "seems to be hurt and can't fly". That it (the bird) can't fly is a case of mistaken belief. As an infant bird's flight feathers grow in, the young bird will begin attempts to fly without being fully capable of sustained flight. The result is that the young bird drops out of the nest and cannot fly back up. Do not worry, though, because the bird's parents will continue to follow the young bird around and take care of it until the young bird can fly and feed itself.

The most important reason, though, for leaving baby animals where you find them - orphaned, abandoned, or whatever - is that there is the potential to cause harm to the animal or put people or domestic animals at risk from disease. Many animals - especially birds - die as a result of stress from being captured by well-intentioned people determined

to save the animals. This stress is not always easy to see but is deadly none the less. Also, humans are not as suitable for raising an animal as its parents.

Rescuing an animal from possible predators simply condemns a predator's offspring to death by starvation. Nature always has more animals born than can survive and animals that are predators depend on this overabundance for their own survival. So, even though you may not see it, saving one individual animal from possible death could result in the death of another animal due to starvation.

Disease is the most serious risk factor for would-be rescuers. Distemper, sarcoptic mange, tularemia, leptospirosis, hepatitis, and rabies are just some serious diseases that you put yourself and your domestic animals at risk of contracting by "rescuing" baby animals, sometimes with fatal results. Wild animals of all ages also carry fleas, ticks, and mites, which can also potentially transmit diseases and other parasites to pets and people.

The end result is - why put yourself, your family, and pets at risk by trying to "rescue" a wild animal that probably does not need to be rescued? If you truly care about wild animals, let them be wild. Leave them there.

For more information about West Point's wildlife, contact the USMA Wildlife Biologist at 938-3857 or via e-mail at yj6936@usma.edu.