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# When you find a 'lost' baby animal, let it be in most cases

THE CREATURE FEATURE

By LINDA LOMBARDI  
For The Associated Press

It's human nature — who can ignore a helpless baby? But if that baby is a wild animal sitting in your backyard, the best way to help it probably is to leave it alone, wildlife experts say.

Many well-intentioned people can do more harm than good by trying to help baby animals that appear to be abandoned. In most cases, they are not.

A mother rabbit, for example, may visit her nest just twice a day. A baby bird on the ground may be perfectly fine. Cindy Reyes, hospital manager at the California Wildlife Center in Calabasas, Calif., says baby birds learn to fly from the ground — which makes a lot more sense than taking the first plunge from a nest high in a tree.

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"If it's got all of its body feathers, maybe a little bit of fluff, but it's completely covered with feathers, that's probably a fledgling bird," she says. "The parents care for them on the ground."

However, a naked, featherless baby bird does need to be put back in the nest. Don't let a common myth mislead you: It's not true that babies will be rejected due to their smell once a human has touched them.

"Birds have a very poor sense of smell," says Kathleen Handley of the Second Chance

Wildlife Center of Gaithersburg, Md. And animals wouldn't nest in our yards if they disliked human scent so much, she says.



AP Photo/Timothy Jacobsen

**Alicia Eastham, a clinic supervisor at Second Chance Wildlife Center in Gaithersburg, Md., cleans out the infected eye of a wounded opossum on March 28. Second Chance takes in up to 5,000 animals in a single year.**

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You can use gloves, or scoop the bird into a container to move it. If you can't find or reach the nest, Reyes suggests making a substitute of a plastic container lined with soft fabric or tissues. You can attach it to a tree; the birds will usually find it and care for the baby there, she says.

(Don't use a birdhouse — the birds may not find the baby, and some species don't nest in enclosed spaces.)

This may seem chancy, but it's more likely to help the animal survive in the long run.

Wildlife rehabilitators can heal injuries, but they're no substitute for animal parents because they can't teach babies how to be successful members of their own species in the wild. And when people raise an animal for a while and then decide to give it up, it often doesn't work, she says.

"(The animals are) so bonded to humans that they can't be released," she says. "It's dangerous. They end up running up to people, and they get frustrated, and they'll bite."

A dangerous animal may have to be euthanized.

It's also illegal to keep native species as pets in most places, and many animals don't tolerate captivity well as adults.

More good reason to trust in nature: Rehabilitators' permits, typically issued by various branches of government, don't allow them to keep animals permanently, only to treat them and care for them until they can be released back into their natural habitats.

And there aren't enough spaces in nature centers or zoos to place even a small percentage — Second Chance in Maryland takes in up to 5,000 animals in a single year.

So the right course in most cases is simply not to intervene when you see a baby animal on its own. Hanging around may actually delay this reunion.

"People have to leave," Reyes says. "They can't be standing over the baby or the parent won't return — even if it sees you standing at the window."

There is an exception to the don't-interfere rule: When a baby is clearly injured, with bleeding or a broken limb, it needs help. Don't feed it. Instead, call a rehabilitator for advice, even before attempting to move it.

Your local animal shelter can usually help you find an expert, or go to the Web site of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association, <http://www.nrawildlife.org/home.asp>.

Generally, the best way to help wildlife is to make your yard a hospitable place: Keep pet cats indoors, plant a wildlife habitat garden, and be careful when you prune, since birds and squirrels could be nesting.

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