

Leave Those Wildlife Babies Alone!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Humans, for the most part, do a pretty good job raising human babies. They also don't do too bad of a job, with a little experience, at raising cat and dog babies and livestock babies (cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, etc.) But when it comes to wildlife babies, most humans are poorly prepared, and, well, they basically stink at it! So let me say it right here and now. As kind hearted as you are, and with all recognition that some of those wildlife babies are going to die, leave them alone!

Wildlife babies are wild creatures. You can not use human logic to understand them nor can you expect them to act like human babies. Just because you find a small critter that appears to be by itself, it doesn't mean it's an orphan. Young rabbits the size of your fist are pretty much on their own and getting along fine without momma, or you!

Contrary to cartoons you've seen and stories you've read, nature is not kind. It is full of harsh realities; actions and consequences. Many species in the wild survive by eating something else. It's the web of life. I periodically have phone calls from homeowners who have found a dead bird in their yard. They are rightly concerned about disease risks that they have heard, often sensationalized, in the news. But most times the birds have died from natural causes. They die of old age, they fly into the side of a building, they collide with wires, or they were injured by something and died of shock. Often that injury has come at the claws of a cat.

The house cat is not native to North America and is likely the most destructive non-native invasive species we have. Current estimates, from several very good studies, place annual deaths, of primarily birds, from cats, at somewhere between one and three billion annually in the United States alone. If you want to do something for wildlife babies, get rid of the feral cats and keep house cats in the house.

For many songbirds, including things like American Robins and Blue Jays, 90% of the babies that are hatched this year, aren't around next spring. Many of these creatures have high reproductive rates for a very good reason. Small mammals, including rabbits, fall right into this category as well. Darwin was absolutely correct; it is survival of the fittest!

Wildlife rehabbers do wonderful work, but this time of year they are swamped by well meaning people. Probably well over half the animals brought to them would have been better off left right where they were. They weren't really orphaned or they were doing just fine. Once you try to take in a wildlife baby, which is illegal in Kansas by the way, that animal is likely to become imprinted on you. You will become it's parental figure. It happens very quickly and once it does, that animal becomes un-releasable because it no longer knows it's an animal and you don't know how to teach it to be what it really is. Yes, it may die if you do nothing, but that's just part of nature.

Now the tough one - your children or grandchildren. We try to raise them to be compassionate, and when they find a small animal, they can only relate to it as a human. There is a deeply ingrained desire to help. This is one of those tough lessons that children need to learn. Death is part of life. Animals don't live lives like humans. Yes there may be tears, but it is important that we remember that we are humans, the critters are wildlife and we need to keep them wild. Am I a heartless old man? Not at all. But I do recognize that wildlife will die and rehabbers have more animals than many of them can take care of at this time of year. So again, please leave those wild babies wild!