

Found A Baby Animal? Leave It Alone!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's spring! That wonderful time of year when flowers are blooming, the world is turning green and baby animals start showing up everywhere. It's the time of year that wildlife managers and rehabilitators dread. You see this is the time of year the people start finding baby animals and not being able to think like anything other than a human being, they think that the animal is orphaned and they must step in and help. Which is the wrong thing to do!

It is hard for humans to understand and accept that raising small animals is far different than raising children. Wild babies grow up very fast. A cottontail rabbit can leave its mother and fend for itself at about 14 days of age, for example. Many wildlife moms do not spend every minute of every day with the youngsters. They may only be with the babies a few times a day as needed to feed them. And unlike human babies, wildlife babies tend to stay put when told to by their mothers. So simply finding a "nest" of young wildlife with no adult immediately attending it does not mean that they have been orphaned.

Picking up young wildlife and trying to care for it is also against the law. Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism AND the Kansas Department of Health and Environment have regulations against picking up and trying to care for wildlife. Nature Centers and wildlife rehabilitators have all sorts of permits, some state and some federal, to do what they do. Not only is it illegal, it is unwise from a health and safety perspective. Many wildlife, even young wildlife, can carry insects and diseases that can move to people. Nobody needs that!

I'll be the first to admit that baby wildlife can be incredibly cute. Children are especially attracted to young wildlife and can only relate to them on human terms. But those wild babies are just that, wild-life. They are not pets, nor are they designed to be pets. Cats and dogs have been domesticated for many millennia and even then they sometimes aren't all that domesticated. With wildlife, it just doesn't work to keep them as pets. They need to stay wild.

Your good intentions usually turn out to be a death sentence for that wildlife. As humans, we are not equipped to care for small wildlife. We think we know what they eat, but can we provide it? Some bird species will partially digest foods and then regurgitate the resulting gruel to feed the small birds. Do you really want to try that? Even if you can keep the small animal alive, it is then going to be unreleasable to the wild as it doesn't know how to be a wild animal. You may be a great human parent, but let's be honest, you are a horrible wildlife parent.

One of the hardest thing for many humans, especially children, to accept is that death is a natural part of the natural world. Many wildlife species have a lot of offspring because so many die before they become adults. In many bird species, over 70% of one year's offspring never make it to the following year. That's just the way it is and as humans we need to accept that.

So what do you do when you come across that wildlife baby? You just steer clear of it. Keep pets away from it. By tomorrow it may very well be gone. Young birds may look only half grown, but many leave the nest a few days before they can fly. The parents are probably close by and in another day or two, it will have grown enough more that it can fly. Rabbits, squirrels, deer and other four legged creatures just need to be left alone. Don't try to put food out for it, just keep yourself, your pets and the kids away. We may think we're doing the right thing, by trying to intervene, but usually it's the worst thing that you could do for that wild baby!