

## **I Know They're Cute, But Leave Them Alone**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Last week I had moved my trash container out to the street in the evening in preparation for trash day. When I went out to pick up the paper the next morning, there was a little rabbit nicely snuggled in to the backside of the container right up against the wheel. It was about the size of my fist and its little ears were about the size of the last knuckle on my little finger. It didn't move, I avoided direct eye contact and it was still there when I left for work. Sometime in the morning it hopped away to the safety of my or my neighbor's shrubs or landscaping.

Yup, those little bunnies are starting to show up and before long we'll have baby birds around and probably baby moles and baby opossums, but we rarely see them out frolicking in the yard. Now comes the harsh reality of the natural world. As a human you have a very important role in all of this. Leave them alone! As hard as it is for humans to accept, most of the time wildlife gets along very well without our help and interference. In fact, most times it gets along better.

Thanks to cartoons and comic books and children's stories, far too many people have this quaint but quite inaccurate view of the natural world. Mommy and Daddy animals don't have this romanticized family where both parents coddle and care for their offspring for weeks, months and years. The natural world truly is survival of the fittest. By human standards it may not always seem right or fair, but it's still the way it is.

Let's start with the little bunny that was by my dumpster. It was a classic eastern cottontail, probably the most abundant rabbit in the state. One female can have as many as seven litters in the period from early spring to late autumn. At ten days of age their eyes are open, at 14 days they will leave the nest and are usually weaned shortly thereafter. At 4 to 5 weeks of age they are totally on their own. By the time that you see them up and running around your yard, they really no longer have need of momma. As for daddy, his part was done well before they were even born and he's been long absent from any care! Not very much of a storybook ending, but that's how rabbits are!

We'll have baby birds out and about any day now. Let's take the well known American Robin. Incubation for robins is 12 to 14 days. The female does virtually all of the incubating. Occasionally the male will bring her food, but generally not. Both parents will feed the nestlings. Young robins will leave the nest at about 14 days of age even though their flight skills are not well tuned. One or both parents will assist the youngsters in feeding for about another ten days to two weeks and then they are on their own. If you're an animal baby, you don't have a choice. You have to grow up fast!

Now for the real hard take home message. If you or a member of your family encounter what appears to be a baby animal, it is best to leave it alone. Roughly 80% of the young birds hatched this spring and summer will not survive to one year of age. That's the way it is. Not only are humans poor animal parents, it is illegal for you to take a wildlife baby into your home and try to raise it. Young birds out of the nest are often left by their parents for extended periods of time as the parents gather feed for themselves and to aid in feeding the young.

As humans, we have an instinct to try to care for these small or young animals. Yet the most important thing you can do is to keep dogs and especially cats away from them and just leave the animal babies alone!