

## Leave Them Alone!

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

With the crazy weather we've been having this year, spring is going to be compressed. Plants are exploding into leaf or bloom. Lawns, finally with a little rain and warmer weather, are growing like gang busters! And wildlife babies are appearing everywhere.

I was at the Milford Nature Center earlier this week and they were bracing for the tidal wave of animal babies that was about to hit them! Humans are very well meaning, but the problem is that they tend to anthropomorphize all other creatures into human terms. Please don't do that! Humans are humans and wildlife is wildlife. How animals are raised and how people are raised are not the same and we can't use human logic in dealing with wildlife babies.

Wildlife babies are wild creatures. 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! The best thing you can often do, is nothing at all. You are not equipped to raise a wild animal, and technically it's illegal. As kind hearted as you, and your children, are, and with all due recognition that some of those wildlife babies are going to die, the best thing is still to leave them alone! There are times when help is needed, but most baby wildlife brought in to rehabbers, don't really need help!

First of all, the presence or absence of an adult animal does not mean that the small animal is orphaned or abandoned. Many adult animals do not hang around with the young to make it harder for predators to locate the young. Deer and rabbits may only visit their young once every 12 hours. The young grow up fast and learning to survive is a crucial lesson in nature.

Storms often cause nests to become dislodged and blow out of trees. If there were eggs in the nest, they are likely lost and the birds will quickly re-nest. If you can place the nest back in the tree do so. Most bird species can't smell so don't worry about touching the nest or the young babies. If you find young that are mostly feathered, then this is a fledgling that is learning to fly and it is very common for them to spend some time on the ground. The parents are probably around, very close, and may even be seen in what appears an attack on the young. This is actually an effort by the parents to teach the young bird how to hide or protect itself from predators. Just don't intercede.

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. For some species of songbirds, nearly 90% of the young from one year do not make it to the next year. These species have high reproductive rates to compensate for this and other species depend on them as a food source. It's very natural.

Something that isn't very natural, at least for us, is the house 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.

Sure, if you've got young children in the home and they find a "baby" animal in the yard, they are going to relate to it and feel that something needs to be done. But you, as the adult, have to intercede and even though your children may not understand you need to explain to them that wildlife babies, need to stay wild.