

Wildlife Babies: Do They Need Our Help?

Imagine walking toward your shed to get extra chairs for the weekend's picnic. You nearly trip over a tiny, spotted fawn curled up in the grass in front of the shed. The alert fawn silently looks up at you with huge, innocent eyes and doesn't move, even when you pass by again with an armful of chairs. On the way back to your patio, you see a baby bird beneath a bush; you can tell that the bird can't fly, but you can hear other birds screaming nearby. Later that day, as you mow the lawn, you see a small rabbit about the size of a tennis ball hop across your path but no parent is nearby. Which of these three animals needs help?

If you answered "None," you're absolutely correct. In the spring, nature welcomes a new generation of wildlife. In most cases, the parents of this new generation do an excellent job of raising their young. The fawn, for example, is doing exactly what its mother told it to do: stay quiet and hidden. Fawns have no scent and their dappled coat is used as camouflage. Until the fawn can keep up with its mother as she forages, the mother relies on these characteristics of camouflage to keep the fawn from danger. She is nearby and will only visit and nurse her fawn a couple of times a day to avoid attracting predators.

The baby bird is also behaving normally. Many fledglings can't fly well when they first leave the nest. The birds you heard screaming overhead were likely the parents, who remain close by to supervise and feed their young as they learn to fly.

And what about the little rabbit that looked too young to be on its own? Young Eastern Cottontails are independent at only four to five weeks of age. At this stage, they are about the size of a tennis ball and fully furred, their eyes are open, and they are no longer nursing.

It is perfectly natural to want to help wildlife—and it is sometimes very hard to resist that urge. We may believe that a young animal is orphaned or abandoned, but that is rarely the case. The parents are nearby, waiting for the human threat to leave so that they can resume caring for their offspring. There is no substitute for a baby animal being raised by its own parents, receiving its natural diet and learning the skills it needs to survive in its own natural surroundings; if we "help" this baby, we can do more harm than good.

Some people also don't realize that in New Jersey, it is illegal to hand raise, treat, or keep nearly every species of wildlife without a permit. These laws are intended to protect both animals and humans. Even well-meaning people can harm wild animals by providing inappropriate housing and nutritional or medical care. In addition, prolonged human contact disrupts an animal's normal behavior and makes it more difficult—sometimes impossible—for the animal to be returned to the wild. And, because animals can transmit certain diseases to humans, these laws protect humans from illness.

But sometimes wildlife *does* need our help. How can we tell when we should leave an animal alone and when it's OK to intervene?

In our opening scenario, if the fawn had been lying flat on the ground covered with flies, or was wandering around and crying incessantly, or was beside its dead mother, it would need help. If the baby bird you spotted on the ground was not fully feathered, it would also have needed help. And if you had accidentally disturbed a nest of baby bunnies while mowing the lawn, these bunnies may need help.

If you think an animal needs additional help, call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Licensed wildlife rehabilitators have the permits, resources and knowledge necessary to treat wildlife injuries and hand raise displaced young wildlife until they are old enough to be released back into the wild.

A wildlife rehabilitator can help you determine what additional help is needed. If necessary, the rehabilitator will talk you through how to safely capture the animal and transport it to a licensed facility for care. To find your nearest licensed wildlife rehabilitator, see www.njfishandwildlife.com/rehablst.htm.