

Wild Things: Baby Rabbits

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Kittens may be the mewling heralds of spring for the sheltering community, but this season is also prime time for wildlife births. For shelters, the ever-increasing number of injured and orphaned wildlife can mean panicked phone calls from the public.

Some rather kittenish-looking critters appearing in droves this season are baby rabbits—who are actually called “kits.” Baby bunnies are especially vulnerable to interactions with people, no matter how well-intentioned those people are. Due to their high-strung, stressed-out natures, wild rabbits are among the most difficult animals to successfully rehabilitate, even with expert care. It’s therefore best to keep them out of human hands whenever possible. In most cases, bunnies who end up with wildlife rehabilitators weren’t even orphaned or injured in the first place—they were kidnapped by well-meaning folks who found them alone and assumed they needed help. Teach your constituents about the na-

ture of baby bunnies, and these animals will stay healthy and wild.

First things first: Learn to tell the difference between a true infant rabbit and one who’s plenty independent. If he’s longer than 4 inches and has full fur, open eyes, and fully erect ears, then he’s a teenager who’s already hopped the nest and is capable of looking after himself. Otherwise, it’s a safe bet mom is still in charge.

Kindhearted folk often assume that a baby mammal without a mother present is an orphan, but this isn’t necessarily the case. Mother rabbits feed their babies only two or three times a day (generally at dawn and dusk) to avoid attracting predators; bunnies found alone in the nest—a shallow depression in the ground, lined with fur and grass—usually aren’t orphans.

But if you have reason to believe the rabbits have been orphaned, or if you find the nest has been disturbed, reassemble it as best you can and cover the babies with the same materials that covered them originally. Then put crossed sticks or yarn over the nest; this high-tech strat-

egy will help you assess whether mom is returning to nurse her young. If the yarn stays undisturbed for 12 hours, contact a wildlife rehabilitator for advice.

Keep all pets out of the area, and try not to touch the bunnies, as mother rabbits are very sensitive to foreign smells on their young and may abandon them. Should you need to pick up the babies, use gloves when handling them. And keep in mind that young rabbits will “freeze” to avoid attracting attention, so don’t pick them up just because they’re motionless.

Lawn mowers are the bane of bunny existence—careless mowing is one of the most common means of nest destruction and rabbit injury or death. But thankfully, prevention is a no-brainer: Always walk the lawn to check for rabbit nests before mowing. In areas with high clumps of grass, part the leaves gently with a stick to check for a nest at the base of the growth. If you do find a nest, mow a wide berth around it, or avoid mowing altogether for a while. The bunnies will be weaned and on their own within three weeks. **AS**