



The most common mistake people make with baby wildlife is rescuing animals that do not need to be rescued. A fledgling bird hopping on the ground, a baby rabbit in a lawn nest, a young opossum walking near a road — most of these animals are healthy. Human intervention often causes more harm than good. This guide helps you know when to act and when to leave well enough alone.

## ■ Baby Birds: The Most Important Distinction

| Stage     | Status          | What It Looks Like                                                                                                             | What to Do                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| NESTLING  | ■ May need help | Featherless or with pin feathers (quills). Eyes may be closed. Cannot hop or walk. Found on ground below a nest.               | If a nest is visible and reachable, place gently back in it. <b>Myth: Parent birds WILL return</b> even after human touch — birds have poor sense of smell and will not reject human-touched young. If nest is destroyed, create a substitute cup nest from a small container with drainage holes, packed with dry grass. |
| FLEDGLING | ■ Leave alone   | Fluffy with short tail and wing feathers emerging. Can hop, walk, flap wings. May look "helpless" but is not. Eyes fully open. | This is NORMAL development. Parents are nearby, watching, and feeding the fledgling on the ground for 1–2 weeks while it learns to fly. Move it only if it is in immediate danger (from cats, cars, etc.) — place it in the nearest shrub. <b>Do not "rescue" fledglings — parent intervention will cease.</b>            |

## ■ ■ Baby Squirrels

- **Eyes closed:** Newborn; needs immediate help. Warm first — a heating pad on the LOWEST setting under HALF the box, so the animal can move away from heat. A towel between heating pad and box. Do not offer food or water.
- **Eyes open and fully furred:** At this stage, squirrels are mobile and can often self-rescue. If it approaches you and appears healthy, it may be searching for its mother. Leave the area for 1–2 hours and see if the mother returns.
- **Fallen from nest:** If a nest has blown down in a storm and babies are present, leave the babies at the base of the tree in a small open box with nesting material. Mother will often retrieve them within 1–2 hours if left undisturbed. If not retrieved, contact a rehabilitator.

## ■ Baby Rabbits

Cottontail nests are depressions in lawns or gardens, lined with dry grass and rabbit fur, often covered with loose material. They look abandoned — **they are not**. Mother cottontails feed their young only twice daily, at dawn and dusk, to avoid drawing predators to the nest. The nest will appear untended all day.

- **Eyes open, fully furred, approximately 4 inches or longer:** Nearly independent; leave alone.
- **Eyes closed or very small:** Needs help. Contact a rehabber.



- **Nest disturbed by pets or lawn equipment:** Repair the nest with the original material; replace babies; mark with an X of flour or string to check if mother returns. Keep pets away.
- **If babies are clearly cold, injured, or crying:** Warm in a box with cloth; do NOT feed; contact rehabilitator IMMEDIATELY. Cottontails are extremely stress-sensitive and difficult to raise in captivity.

## ■ Baby Raccoons

Raccoons are devoted mothers. A baby raccoon alone during daytime is unusual — raccoons are nocturnal and mothers typically keep young hidden. A lone raccoon calling loudly may be separated from its mother. Leave the area quiet for 4–6 hours; the mother may retrieve it at nightfall.

**If still alone after 6 hours, or if cold, visibly injured, or eyes closed:** Place in a box — do NOT handle with bare hands (sharp claws; wear thick gloves). Keep warm, quiet, and dark. Do not offer food. Contact a licensed rehabilitator.

## ■ Baby Opossums

Young opossums that have separated from their mother should be at least **7 inches from nose to tail base** (not counting the tail) before they can survive independently. Pink, hairless, or very small opossums found off the mother require immediate professional care. If the mother is found dead and young are still attached, gently pry them free (very small joeys are fully attached and may require veterinary assistance to remove safely) and contact a wildlife rehabilitator immediately.

■ **What NOT to Do — Ever:** Do not feed baby wildlife cow's milk, human baby formula, fruit juice, bread, or water via dropper (all can cause aspiration pneumonia, bloat, or death). Do not keep wild animals as pets (illegal and harmful). Do not place animals in direct sunlight or near drafts. Do not attempt to raise wild animals at home — most die from improper nutrition even with the best intentions. Wildlife needs wildlife rehabilitators.

■ **Contact a Wildlife Rehabilitator BEFORE You Act:** Wild Bird Fund (birds): (212) 331-9495 | NYS DEC Wildlife Hotline: 1-800-847-7332 | NYC 311 (for bats or sick/injured wildlife in NYC) | The Wildlife Center of Virginia Hotline (general guidance): (540) 942-9453 | Always call first — a rehabilitator will tell you exactly what to do.



## ■ Final Summary

The greatest gift you can give baby wildlife is the gift of not interfering. Most "abandoned" animals are not abandoned at all. When genuine help is needed, the right action is to contact a licensed rehabilitator — not to attempt care at home. Wildlife is resilient; it needs expertise, not just kindness.

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