



Handle Wild Things With Care

How to Safely Help Injured Animals

by Sandra Murphy

When encountering a bird or animal that appears to be abandoned, take only minimal steps to help. “People mean well but a lot of rescues we see, didn’t need help,” says Lacy Campbell, wildlife care center operations manager for the Audubon Society of Portland, Oregon. Make sure the animal is away from traffic or predators, and then call a local wildlife rehabilitator before taking further action, especially if the animal is injured.

Vulnerable Little Ones

Baby squirrels can fall out of the nest. “Leave him at the base of the tree,” says Jennifer Keats Curtis, author of the children’s book *Squirrel Rescue*. “Mom will rebuild the nest before coming to get her baby. If it’s cold, put it in a box with a towel. Once squirrels have been treated as a pet, they can’t be released.”

Tiny, not-yet-feathered nestlings should be returned home; it’s a myth that human scent poses a problem. If the nest is out of reach or can’t be located, make one with a box and soft cloth. Put it in the tree, so the parents can resume feeding. Leave the area so as not to frighten them.

“After young robins, scrub jays, crows and owls leave the nest, they typically spend up to a week on the

ground before they can fly," says Campbell. "At night, the parents will escort the fully feathered fledglings to safety beneath a bush."

In parks, ducks and geese may nest away from the water. Mama will lead her babies to the pond, even across busy streets. If it's safe, stop the car to halt traffic, act as their crossing guard, and then resume driving.

A box turtle operates on innate GPS. "It lives in an area the size of a football field," explains Curtis. "It will go onward, no matter how many times people try to redirect it. If injured by a car or lawn mower, the shell can be mended by a rehab center."

Bunnies eat at dusk and dawn. In-between, the nest may look abandoned. "Wild baby rabbits are difficult to keep alive if injured," says Curtis. "At sundown, see if mom returns; if not, they need a wildlife rehab expert."

A lone, young raccoon is either old enough to climb a tree by itself or the mother will carry it. If we feed a raccoon, it will become a beggar. Opossums are dramatic actors. When cornered, they hiss and fall over and play dead in a coma-like state for up to four hours. Check back later. If a mother possum has been killed by a car, call a rehab official to check her pouch for potential babies.

"If you find a young deer fawn or moose calf, leave it. The mother comes back several times each day to nurse," advises Amanda Nicholson, director of outreach for the Wildlife Center of Virginia, in Waynesboro. "Its coloring helps it remain undetected by predators."

Other Unexpected Encounters

"Don't feed wild animals or leave out food or accessible comestible trash. Bobcats, wolves, bears and coyotes will avoid people unless food is involved," cautions Jennifer Place, program associate for Born Free USA, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C. "Wild animals protect their space, food and young, so stay on marked trails when hiking and never turn your back on them."

For unexpected meetings, stay calm. "Make sure there's an escape route for the animal," says Place.



WILDLIFE TRANSPORT TIPS

If a wild animal is injured, wear heavy gloves in its vicinity to avoid being bitten or scratched. Completely cover the animal with a blanket so it stays relatively calm, and place it in a carrier for transport to a rehabilitation facility. A warm hot water bottle can help ward off shock.

Do not give the animal water, milk or food. Time is of the essence to ward off dangers of stress. Wild animals can carry disease without appearing to be ill. Fleas, ticks and mites are likely, so keep injured wildlife away from pets and children.

"With foxes or coyotes, throw sticks or small rocks, but don't hit the animal. Make yourself look large and yell." With snakes, sidestep away slowly for more than six feet before walking in the other direction. Bears require a different response. "Speak in a low voice so the bear realizes you are not prey. Never climb a tree," says Place. "Bears know the terrain, can run faster than a horse and can climb trees, too. Sidestep away, remaining carefully upright, calm and unthreatening. If the bear moves toward you, keep talking until he moves away. Running kicks in its prey drive."

Yellowstone Park regulations require visitors to stay 25 yards away from most wildlife and 100 yards away from bears and wolves. Selfie photos with animals can result in injury or death for humans and animals through carelessness; safety depends on good judgement, respect and common sense.

Friends of wildlife know beforehand how to contact local rehabilitators if there's an emergency, observe before taking action, and protect pets. "Always leash dogs when going into the yard at night and keep cats indoors," says Place. "Peaceful co-existence allows for the safety of both people and animals, domestic and wild."

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