

Rescuing Wild Mammals: Part 1

By Sharon St. Joan

To rescue or not to rescue?

Every year, many thousands of young wild animals are “rescued” by kind people wanting to help them. Unfortunately, many of these young animals do not need to be rescued. They do not need help, and, in fact, moving them means that they are being separated from their mothers.



It is usually a life or death choice whether to rescue or not to rescue a young wild creature.

Separating an animal from his mother will certainly lessen his chances for survival. On the other hand, not helping a very young orphaned animal may mean certain death for the animal. A mammal who does need to be rescued must be taken immediately to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

A few guidelines are provided below for whether to rescue different types of animals. However, it's impossible to cover all situations that may arise. If, having read these guidelines, you are still feeling uncertain about whether a particular animal needs to be rescued, please call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator and ask for advice.

Fawns

Do not “rescue” fawns. Unless you have actually seen a dead doe nearby, do not move a fawn. Does leave their fawns alone for many hours every day. The fawn's instincts lead him to lie absolutely still, and if a person tries to pick him up, he will appear to be paralyzed. This often leads the “rescuer” to assume that he is injured and that he needs help. However, this is a mistake – the fawn does not need help. Leave the fawn alone, and leave the area immediately.

The Young of Large Carnivores

Do not “rescue” the cubs of large carnivores such as bears, wolves, coyotes, bobcats or cougars. “Rescuing” them is likely to be very dangerous for you as well as for the cub.

If you see a dead mother bear, wolf, bobcat, cougar, coyote, or other large carnivore, and you see a cub nearby, make a careful note of the location of the animals, and call your state wildlife department. If you know a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who cares for large carnivores, you may call the rehabilitator instead. However, there may not be a large mammal rehabilitator near you.

Bear cubs frequently wander alone at some distance from their mother. A person removing them from the area is essentially kidnapping them from their mother. If the mother bear reappears suddenly, she will be very angry, very dangerous, and very likely

to attack. This is also true of other large carnivores. If you see a young cub who seems to be alone, leave the area immediately, and contact a state wildlife officer or a wildlife rehabilitator.

The wildlife officers will determine how to relate to the cub according to their own policies. In most cases, the cub is not really orphaned at all, and the cub's mother will reappear. If the cub is genuinely orphaned, wildlife officers will be able to take the cub to a wildlife rehabilitator in some cases. In other cases, this will not be possible, and the cub may have to be euthanized. A genuinely orphaned young cub cannot survive alone in the wild, so euthanasia may be necessary.

Young Squirrels and Chipmunks

Before picking up a young squirrel or chipmunk who appears to be orphaned, stand a distance away (so you don't deter the mother from returning) for half an hour to an hour and look for the baby's mother. She may reappear momentarily. Even if the mother does not reappear, you should leave the young squirrel or chipmunk alone if she appears lively, active, and not in any difficulty.

However, if the mother does not reappear after an hour and the baby runs toward you, appearing very oddly friendly, as if she is asking for something very insistently, she may have been separated from her mother and may be starving. She will need to be rescued. See the resource "Rescuing Wild Mammals: Part 2" for instructions, and call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

If the baby appears clearly injured or very cold and still, then she definitely needs help immediately. Call a wildlife rehabilitator.

Young Cottontails

If you see a young cottontail who appears to have all his fur, is at least eight inches long, has his eyes open, and is able to hop, he does not need to be rescued. He has already left the nest, and is able to survive on his own. If you find him sitting in the road, simply move him well off to one side of the road.

If the young cottontail is clearly injured, if you can see that he is bleeding or if he has his eyes closed and seems cold, listless or unable to move, then he does need to be rescued and should be taken to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. You should also take him to a rehabilitator if he has had any encounter with a cat (even if the injury seems minor) or any other accident, such as getting his fur oiled.

If the young cottontail seems very small, if his eyes are not yet open, if he seems to be too young to hop, or if you suspect that he may have been removed from his nest by a cat, then he'll need to be rescued and taken to a rehabilitator. Often, a small baby cottontail who needs to be rescued will be lying down, not sitting as if ready to hop, and he will often feel cold or appear to be in shock.

Young Skunks and Raccoons

Some states have laws against rehabilitating skunks and raccoons. Call a wildlife rehabilitator before rescuing these young mammals, and ask for advice about what to do.

In many cases where young skunks and raccoons are found, their mother has been trapped and relocated. Relocating these animals is usually illegal, and it is always unkind, since the adult animal may not survive relocation. If you feel that a particular skunk or raccoon living in your area is a problem, ask a wildlife rehabilitator how to relate to the animal.

Young Beavers

If you come across a small young beaver, in water, who seems too young to be on his own, contact a wildlife rehabilitator to ask for advice before rescuing the young beaver.

Baby Opossums

Many opossums are injured or killed on the roads, and if the opossum is a mother, she can have small baby opossums still alive in her pouch. Opossums are marsupials, and they have pouches like kangaroos. If you come across a dead or injured opossum, contact a wildlife rehabilitator, and take the opossum to him or her.

Large Injured, Adult Wild Mammals

As a general rule, a wild adult mammal who is not moving away from you is either ill or injured. Do not attempt to rescue large adult mammals by yourself. Contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Don't ever approach injured coyotes, bobcats, wolves, cougars, bears, or any other large carnivores. They will become frightened and will attack. Even if you find an injured deer, don't approach the animal. Stay a distance away, and call a rehabilitator or a state wildlife officer. Often, the local police or sheriff's department will be able to contact a wildlife officer, even after normal hours. If you are with someone, one of you may stay at a distance watching the animal, while the other goes for assistance. Of course, it's always helpful to have a cell phone with you.

In the case of large injured wild mammals, the options for effectively helping them are often very limited. It's good to be aware of this when contacting a wildlife rehabilitator or a wildlife officer. Don't insist that the animal should be kept alive if the animal will not be releasable back into the wild; it may not be the kindest outcome for the animal.

Small Injured, Adult Wild Mammals

If you find an injured skunk or raccoon, contact a wildlife rehabilitator before rescuing or moving the animal. You may rescue and transport to a wildlife rehabilitator small injured wild mammals, such as squirrels, chipmunks, cottontails, pack rats, marmots, voles or other small creatures. Be aware, though, that even very small mammals may bite, and

some may carry diseases. To know how to confine and transport them, see the resource “Rescuing Wild Mammals: Part 2.”

There are rehabilitators who specialize in bats. If you find an injured bat, move the bat by placing a piece of cardboard underneath the bat, and placing it in a cardboard box. In rare cases, bats may carry rabies, so do not touch the bat with your hands. Call a wildlife rehabilitator and refer to “Rescuing Wild Mammals: Part 2.” If someone else has touched the bat, keep a record of that person’s name and contact information to give to the wildlife rehabilitator.

Wildlife Found in Traps

In most cases, a trapped wild animal will be too injured to be released back to the wild, and you’ll need to focus on seeing that the animal is euthanized, rather than being left in the trap to suffer.

If you come across a wild animal in a trap, do not release the animal, since he is likely to be badly injured, and, if released, will probably die slowly and painfully. Instead, call the sheriff, the police, or the state wildlife department. Describe the situation, and ask them to come look at the trap and the animal. Trapping is legal in some states. If the trap is legal, the officer will need to contact the person who set the trap to come and kill the animal to eliminate further suffering. If the trap is illegal, the officer will usually euthanize the animal, who is probably badly injured, and remove the trap.

Regarding the outcome of these situations, remember that wild animals are quite different from domestic animals. A three-legged dog may lead a happy life, but a coyote who is missing a paw has an injury that will prevent him from having a good quality of life, and it is unkind to leave him alive to suffer.

Advisory: While helping wildlife is an act of kindness, it’s important to know that deciding to rescue and transport any wild animal is entirely your own choice. There are certain risks of disease or injury, and no one other than yourself is liable for any harm or injury that may be incurred – neither Best Friends Animal Society nor any licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Sharon St. Joan established Feathered Friends at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary and has cared for birds and wildlife for over 15 years. She now devotes her time to writing about birds and wildlife-related issues.

See also: Rescuing Wild Mammals: Part 2
How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator