

Found an orphaned or injured baby wild animal?

How to tell if baby animals are orphaned, injured or perfectly fine—and what to do if they need your help



Because fawns are left alone by their mothers much of the day, they are often mistaken for orphans.

It is common to see baby wild animals outside during spring, as a new generation makes its way into the world. Baby wild animals might seem like they need our help, but unless the animal is truly orphaned or injured, there is no need to rescue them. These tips can help you decide whether or not to take action.

Signs that a wild animal needs your help

- The animal is brought to you by a cat or dog.
- There's evidence of bleeding.
- The animal has an apparent or obvious broken limb.
- A bird is featherless or nearly featherless and on the ground.
- The animal is shivering.
- There is a dead parent nearby.
- The animal is crying and wandering all day long.

If you see any of these signs, find help for the animal. If necessary, safely capture and transport them to the appropriate place for treatment.

Tips for birds, rabbits, squirrels, and other species

Whether an animal is orphaned and needs your help depends on their age, species, and behavior. Babies of some species are left alone all day and rely on camouflage for protection, while others are tightly supervised by their parents. Read on for descriptions of what is normal for each species.

Baby birds

If baby birds are clearly injured or in imminent danger, contact CASS. If featherless or nearly featherless baby birds have fallen from their nest but appear unharmed, put them back in the nest if you can do so without danger to yourself. (It is a myth that birds will abandon their young if a person touches them.)

Fully feathered birds: If the original nest was destroyed or is too high to reach, hang a small, shallow wicker basket close to where the original nest was. Woven stick baskets from garden stores or supermarket floral departments work well; they resemble natural nests and allow rain to pass through so the birds will not drown. Adult birds will not jump into anything they cannot see out of, so make sure the basket is not too deep. Put the fallen babies into the new nest and keep watch from a distance for an hour to make sure the parent birds return to the new nest to feed their chicks. Watch closely because parent birds can be quite stealthy. If they definitely do not return, contact CASS.

Nearly or mostly featherless birds: These birds will become too cold in a makeshift nest, so you must place them in the original nest. If that's not possible, contact CASS. Remember that baby birds do best when raised by their parents or other birds, so try to reunite them with their parents before calling CASS.

Fledglings: Birds with fully feathered bodies, but short or non-existent tail feathers may be fledglings (adolescent birds who have left the nest). You might see them hopping on the ground, unable to fly. This is normal; birds learn to fly from the ground up! Fledglings might remain on the ground for a few days or even a week, supervised and fed by their parents a few times each hour before they get the hang of flying. You can tell if the fledglings are being fed by watching from a distance to see whether a parent bird flies over to them, usually a few times an hour. You can also look for white-grey feces near the fledgling. Birds defecate after being fed, so the presence of fecal material means that the birds are being cared for. Be sure to keep cats indoors and dogs leashed until the fledglings are old enough to fly. If you are positive that the parents aren't returning to feed the babies, contact CASS.

Baby rabbits

Rabbits at least four inches long with open eyes and erect ears and who hop well are independent from their mother and should be allowed to fend for themselves. Uninjured baby rabbits in an intact nest should also be left alone. Although they might look abandoned because their mom is not around, mother rabbits visit their dependent young only a few times a day to avoid attracting predators. If the nest has been disturbed, lightly cover it with natural materials you find around the nest, like grass, fur or leaves and follow these steps:

- Keep all pets out of the area.
- Avoid touching the babies because foreign smells may cause the mother to abandon their young.
- Use yarn or string to make a tic-tac-toe pattern over the nest to assess whether the mother is returning to nurse their young. Check back 24 hours later.
- If the yarn or string was moved aside, but the nest is still covered with fur, grass or leaves, the mother has returned to nurse the babies.
- If the “X” remains undisturbed for 24 hours, contact CASS.
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Baby squirrels

A squirrel who is nearly full-sized, has a full and fluffy tail and can run, jump and climb is independent. However, if a juvenile squirrel continuously approaches and follows people, their mom is probably gone. In this case, you should contact CASS because the baby is very hungry and needs care.

There are a few cases where you might need to intervene:

- A baby squirrel falls from a nest.
- A nest falls from a tree.
- A felled tree contains an intact nest.

If the baby and/or their nest fell from the tree today, give the mother squirrel a chance to reclaim their young and relocate them to a new nest. If the baby is uninjured, leave them where they are, leave the area, keep people and pets away and monitor them from a safe distance.

If it is chilly outside or the baby isn't fully furred, place them in a shoebox with something warm underneath (like a heating pad on a low setting or a hot water bottle). Be sure to put a flannel shirt between the baby and the heating device, or they could overheat. Do not cover them with anything or the mother might not be able to find them.

If the babies are not retrieved by dusk, take these steps:

- Wearing thick gloves, gather the squirrels and place them inside a thick, soft cloth, such as a cloth diaper or fleece scarf or hat.
- Place one of the following items beneath the cloth: A chemical hand warmer inside a sock, a hot water bottle (replace the hot water every 30 minutes) or a heating pad set on the lowest setting. (If the heating pad has no cover, put it inside two pillowcases so the babies do not overheat.)
- Place the baby squirrels, cloth and warmer inside a small cardboard box or carrier. Call CASS.

Baby deer

People often mistakenly assume that a fawn (baby deer) found alone is orphaned. If the fawn is lying down calmly and quietly, their mother is nearby, and they are OK. A doe only visits and nurses their fawn a few times a day to avoid attracting predators. Unless you know that the mother is dead, leave the fawn alone.

Although mother deer are wary of human smells, they still want their babies back. If you already handled the fawn, quickly return the fawn to the exact spot where you found them and leave the area; the mother deer will not show herself until you are gone.

If the fawn is lying on their side or wandering and crying incessantly all day, they probably need help. If this is the case, contact CASS.

Baby foxes

Fox kits will often appear unsupervised for long periods while their parents are out hunting for food. They will play like puppies around the den site until the parents decide they are old enough to go on hunting trips. Then they will suddenly disappear. Observe the kits from a distance; if they seem energetic and healthy, leave them alone. If they appear sickly or weak, or if you have reason to believe both parents are dead, contact CASS.

Baby opossums

Baby opossums are born as embryos, barely larger than a bee, and spend about two months nursing in their mother's pouch. When they get to be about three to four inches long and start riding around on their mother's back, they may fall off without the mother noticing. As a general rule, if an opossum is over seven inches long (not including the tail), they're old enough to be on their own. If they're less than seven inches long (not including the tail), they are orphaned, and you should contact CASS.

Baby raccoons

If a baby raccoon has been alone for more than a few hours, they are probably an orphan. Mother raccoons don't let their young out of their sight for long. Put an inverted laundry basket over the baby (with a light weight on top so they cannot push their way out) and monitor them until well into the nighttime hours (raccoons are nocturnal, so the mom should come out at night to reclaim her baby). You can also put the cub in a pet carrier and close the door. Instead of latching it, prop it closed with an angled stick. When the mother returns, she will run in front of the carrier, push over the stick and the door will pop open.

If the mother does not return, contact CASS. In spring and summer, people often set traps in a misguided effort to resolve garbage and other "nuisance" issues. Unfortunately, this approach leads to trapped and killed mothers who leave their starving young behind. If anyone in your neighborhood is setting traps, persuade them to use more humane and effective methods instead.

Baby skunks

If you see a baby skunk (or a line of baby skunks, nose-to-tail) running around without a mother in sight, they could be orphaned. Skunks have poor eyesight, so if something scares the mother and they run off, the babies can quickly lose sight of them.

Monitor the situation to see if the mother rejoins their young. If the babies are on the move, put on gloves and slowly place a plastic laundry basket (with lattice sides) over the babies to keep them in one spot and make it easier for the mother to find them. Do not put a weight on top of the laundry basket.

If the mother returns to her young, she will flip up the basket and get them. If she has trouble doing this, you should lift the basket to let them out. Remember that skunks are very near-sighted, so fast movements can startle them into spraying. If you move slowly and speak softly though, you will not get sprayed. Skunks warn potential predators by stamping their front feet when they are alarmed, so if the mother doesn't do this, you're safe to proceed. If no mother comes to retrieve the young by dawn, contact CASS.

Finding help for the animal

Once you are sure the animal needs your help, CASS for assistance.

Cabot Animal Support Services Officers serve the community by defending threatened animals from abuse or neglect, containing aggressive animals, assisting other agencies with wildlife, and ensuring that City ordinances related to animal welfare are followed.