

Injured Wildlife

Dealing with Injured and Orphaned Wildlife.

Ben Kruser *The Leader*, March 1990.

One of the inevitable questions leaders have to answer every spring goes something like this: "Scouter, we found a baby wild animal. Is it hurt? What do we do?"

Before coming on staff with Scouts Canada, I was a wildlife biologist with the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Part of my responsibility was to help in the operation of New England's largest wildlife rehabilitation centre. It was a time of mixed feelings and emotions, successes and dismal efforts. Having been on the receiving end of many good intentions turned sour, I write this article in the hope it will help Scouters deal with the wildlife issue with both compassion and knowledge.

Distressed wildlife fit into two categories: helpless and injured. A helpless animal is one that, for some reason, has been orphaned or abandoned. Usually, you find the young animal near a dead parent or close to a broken nest with no evidence of adult attention. Injured animals commonly show signs: blood, discharges from the nose or eyes, body malformations, lack of movement, or abnormal actions.

Before we talk about intervention approaches, it's important to be aware of some of the life cycle facts about mammals and birds and weigh these facts against some ethical questions.

Biological Facts

Young animals begin to appear during spring. After birth, babies go through a process known as imprinting, where they instinctively bond to the first moving object that regularly appears in the nest to care for them. Through imprinting, the young animal learns to identify with its species and follows its parents around.

During this period of following, the young animal learns species specific behaviours, habits, warning signals, calls and other things it needs to survive. Young songbirds generally stay with the parents for six to eight weeks before they are on their own. Small mammals such as skunks and raccoons, however, must spend a full year with the adult before they become totally independent.

Birds: Many songbirds hatch their young in early spring. The parents spend up to 21 hours each day for three or four weeks feeding their nestlings. At around four weeks, young birds have enough feathers to attempt early flight. They hop out of the nest and spend another two weeks on the ground or in low bushes. Parents locate these fledglings by calling, and it is not uncommon for the brood to be scattered over a large distance. As the young learn to find food for themselves between parental visits, they develop more feathers and independence.

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Small Mammals: The most common small mammals we generally encounter are squirrels, skunks, raccoons, rabbits, and woodchucks. Like birds, small mammals begin appearing in the spring, either as young born in the nest in late winter or early spring or, as in the case with skunks, as young who have overwintered with the mother.

Because small mammals do not migrate great distances like birds, they establish a territory that provides their food, water, shelter and space. Mammals have a larger "range" where they travel, but they strongly defend their territory within the range. Small mammals also have a tremendous homing ability. Relocation studies have shown that woodchucks and raccoons are able to get back to their original territory even after they've been moved many kilometres away.

Consequences of Intervention

Now that you have a few biological facts about wildlife, it's easier to explain some of the negative consequences of intervening with young wild animals.

Birds: Nestlings require much work in order to meet their nutritional demands. Most humans are not equipped to commit 21 hours a day to feeding or to make all the appropriate calls and movements of the parent bird.

The danger of imprinting at the nestling stage is a concern. Young birds hand-reared by humans will identify themselves as people. Although it might be cute to see a wild bird hopping on someone's head, the bird is poorly equipped to fend for itself when it is released. If the bird survives to next year's breeding season, it will search out and defend its territory against human intruders rather than more natural dangers.

In general, up to 90 percent of the birds hatched each spring do not survive to migrate. The large number of baby birds produced every year is nature's way of ensuring enough young survive to breed the following year.

Mammals: Imprinting can also be a major problem with small mammals raised by humans. Unfortunately, as they get older, mammals will attach themselves to one member of the family and become aggressive against other people.

Because of their homing ability, mammals you take to a local park to release will desperately try to reach their former home, and hand-raised animals see your house - not the woods - as home. They rarely stay put. Because they are immature and unable to respond appropriately to like species, they are quickly driven out by resident adult animals who see them as intruders on their territory.

A young animal in that situation gets into trouble as it searches out familiar food in garbage cans. Many small mammals die from pet attacks because they

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were raised with the family dog and cat and consider them a friendly species. Road kills also take their toll as transient wildlife cross highways in attempts to reach home your home.

The Ethical Questions

Given all of these problems, why get involved? As humans, we have compassion and feelings towards living things in need. These are qualities we wish to foster in our children and need to balance against the hard realities of nature.

Humans are the primary cause of the habitat loss and food chain disruptions that push wildlife into close proximity with people. Therefore, we share in the responsibility to insure all wildlife have a chance at survival, especially animals that are rare, threatened or endangered.

Urban wildlife problems are a symptom of habitat loss. We need to look at ways to help preserve, protect or create green spaces and parks near our cities.

We all know of cases where someone has rescued a wild animal and helped it recover until it could be released or turned over to expert wildlife rehabilitators. In all of these cases, short term intervention is preferable to long term care.

What To Do

Okay, you've got some basic information and some considerations to keep in mind. What are the things you should do when an excited youngster comes running with the call, "Scouter, we found a . . .!"

When someone discovers a wild animal, the first step is to assess if it is helpless or injured. A good majority of wildlife "rescues" are unnecessary.

If the animal is injured, you will need to decide whether it poses a threat to people or domestic animals. If the potential is there, contact the police, wildlife office or humane society, and report the problem.

If the animal is young and appears helpless, try to observe it over a period of time. Never assume it has been abandoned and will die without your intervention. Small mammal adults only return to the nest one or two times a day. Bird parents are more attentive.

To keep it out of harm's way, if the animal is quite small and exposed to view, move it to a location nearby where pets and children will not see it. It is a myth that parent animals will abandon young because they have human scent on them. Mammals identify their young by anal odours and birds have practically no sense of smell. Parents only abandon their young when the nest or young animal is constantly harassed by curious people.

Usually, the best action is to put the young animal out of sight, swallow your heart, and walk away.

When You Can't Walk Away

Sometimes you'll find yourself in a situation when you can't just leave an animal. Here are some tips to consider.

Birds: If you discover an injured bird, try to figure out what kind it is. Does it look like a hawk, a gull, or a songbird? For larger birds, wear leather gloves and use a large blanket to cover and capture the animal. Pick it up carefully and place it in a large box with a towel in the bottom for traction.

If the bird has no external injuries, observe it for a few hours. If there is an obvious injury, pack crumpled newspaper around the bird just as you would if packing a crystal vase. This will prevent the animal from being tossed around when you transport it to a wildlife authority. You might also loosely tape a broken wing against the body to prevent further injury.

If you find young songbirds that are fairly naked or furnished only with little "pin" feathers, you have nestlings. Try to locate the nest or build a small artificial nest and return the bird to the same place. Often, parent songbirds will continue to care for it.

If this action isn't possible, you can sustain nestlings by placing them in a box with a heating pad set on low. Never place them directly on a heat source. Feed songbirds dry dog food softened in water, not milk because birds can not digest it. Bread is also a poor food.

Contact a wildlife officer, the SPCA or, for waterfowl, a Ducks Unlimited biologist for more detailed information. Many birds are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Act, and you may need permission from a wildlife official to care for some species.

Well feathered songbirds are fledglings. If someone finds one seemingly abandoned, put it in a high bush and leave it alone. Keep children and pets away until the bird has moved on.

If it is necessary to hold the bird for a short time (let's say you found it soaking wet during a fierce thunderstorm), you can feed the fledgling the same food as you would a nestling. House it in a roomy cardboard box. Wire bird cages will break the feathers and prevent normal flying. When the situation is safe again, release the bird in the same area you found it.

Water birds, such as herons, and birds of prey require special diets. To prevent nutritional or behavioural problems, it's important for these birds to be cared for by trained personnel.

Mammals: Injured small mammals can be quite dangerous, so approach with extreme caution. Animals such as skunks and foxes can carry rabies or canine distemper. An obvious sign of disease or

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debilitating injury is the fact that the animal is exposed to view.

If the mammal poses an immediate threat to the community, you can attempt to place a steel garbage can over it. When you are successful, slide a piece of plywood under the can and gently tip the can to an upright position with the animal inside. Replace the plywood with the can lid to contain the animal.

Always wear leather gloves and boots while handling small mammals. Call police, wildlife officer or SPCA for help.

If the small mammal appears helpless, leave it alone or capture it as above and release it nearby out of sight. You can check every few hours to see if it has moved or is still around. If you feel the animal is dehydrated or needs a nutrition boost to increase its ability to survive, it may help to feed it a milk formula. Mix one tin evaporated milk with one or two thirds water. Be careful not to let the animal get wet, and never give it a bath, which will cause chilling and play havoc with its body temperature.

When the animal has regained its strength or increased its activity, release it back to the wild. Delaying the inevitable will only compound the problems it already faces.

Temporary care of a wild animal is a tremendous opportunity for a family to observe first hand the wonder of life. It can also lead to what wildlife rehabilitators call "The Bambi Syndrome". This is when human qualities are put onto the animal and they become "part of the family".

Domestic pets are bred to be part of a family and deserve to have a family name. Wild animals, for the biological and life cycle reasons we've discussed, are a different situation. In order to help both you and your family face the day when the animal is returned to the wild, resist the urge to name it.

And as hard as it may seem, resist the temptation to show the animal off to everyone. This will lessen the chances that it will become accustomed to people and stressed from captivity. Keep the animal in a quiet, secluded area until it is time to release it.

Something many adults do not think about when caught up in the heat of emotion is that the animal they've rescued might die in front of the family. When this happens, it is a sad time, and children will look to you for explanations. Do your best to try to explain the natural order of life. If you say something like, "God took it away", you leave children with an impression that God is a heartless animal butcher.

Remember that wild animals belong in the wild. If you encounter a wild animal in need, seek help. ---