



# Oh, Baby!

For young animals, it's an urban jungle out there. Here's how to help prevent tragedy from befalling wild families living in a human-dominated danger zone.

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

**When spring finally arrives** after winter's long chill, all of nature seems to celebrate. Birds twitter atop budding branches, and bees collect pollen from beckoning flowers. Matchmaking is in full swing: Owl couples hoot to establish their territories, woodpeckers drum in spring courtship, and lovestruck squirrels chase each other. Nests and cozy dens are soon everywhere in preparation for the new crop of babies.

For The HSUS's wildlife rehabilitation centers and urban wildlife staff, springtime is heralded by another sign—the phones start ringing off the hook. The sounds of babies calling for absent parents are hard for the attuned ear to miss, and desperate advice-seeking callers describe common scenarios: baby birds toppled from their nests, raccoon babies wandering around by themselves, infant squirrels trapped in attics, tiny rabbits huddled together with no sign of their mother.

If the parents are truly dead and not just off finding food, they could have been felled by any of a host of survival challenges: attack by other animals, disease, injury, natural disaster, or a hunter's weapon. Even those opportunistic species who have adapted well to human society—diving for our scraps, nibbling our gardens, and taking shelter in our buildings—must contend with the threats wrought by an urban environment, such as fast-moving cars, free-roaming pets, poisoning, traps, even lawnmowers.

But though we are the cause of many wild animals' demise, we can also take steps to prevent such tragedies—or at least help wildlife beat the odds when they do occur. Read on to find out how.



# 1 Baby Wildlife Tip #1:

## LOOK AND LISTEN FOR PEEPERS AND SQUEAKERS

“Assume babies are everywhere,” says Laura Simon, field director for The HSUS’s Urban Wildlife office in Connecticut. Wild mamas can build their nests in trees and bushes and under rocks and logs—but also in attics and chimneys and under porches and eaves. Think of your house and any outbuildings as a “hotel for wildlife,” she says: a warm and sheltered environment for vulnerable young.

Pay attention when repairing your house’s siding, roof, or foundation; closing a hole to an attic or a crawl space can cut off a mother’s route to her young. Simon remembers taking a call from an elderly woman who’d been holed up in her house for nearly five days, held captive by a squirrel attacking her windows and doors and running toward her whenever she ventured outside. After digging a little deeper, Simon discovered the woman’s nephew had recently closed up an old dryer vent where the squirrel had built a nest; the animal “was going crazy trying to get back to her babies.” Simon instructed the nephew to undo his patch job. “The squirrel zoomed right in and pulled out one baby at a time, and took them to a new den site.”

For callers who suspect an animal has moved in, Simon recommends stuffing the possible entry point with newspaper and checking back after 48 hours. If it’s disturbed, that’s a sign an animal is coming and going, possibly a mother with babies.

The newspaper trick also works for checking nesting cavities of trees slated for removal or trimming. If possible, Simon recommends delaying such work until late fall, when trees are less likely to be used for shelter. And before proceeding, homeowners should wrap a 5-foot piece of sheet metal around the trunk, about 4 feet off the ground. “That way, any mammals living there will come down and not be able to come back up.”

Pay attention to what’s underfoot as well, checking the ground



In fox families, both parents care for the kits, who can be left unsupervised for long periods while mom and dad are off catching dinner. “They’ll play like puppies,” says The HSUS’s Laura Simon.

for rabbit nestlings, turtles, and other vulnerable animals who could end up in the path of your lawnmower. While the best habitats are created from letting grass and other plants grow naturally, homeowners who must keep neatly trimmed yards can take steps to tread as lightly as possible during their cleanup activities.

Finally, keep a rescue kit in your home and car so you can help baby animals you’ve determined to be orphaned. The kit should include items such as a carrier, towel, heating pad, chemical hand warmers, gloves (both heavy duty and latex), a laundry basket, and small wicker baskets (see p. 21 for details). For your fridge and glovebox, keep lists of area wildlife rehabilitators and their specialties.

➤ **FOR MORE TIPS** on preventing injuries to wild animals during spring cleanup, go to [humansociety.org/magazine](http://humansociety.org/magazine).

# 2 Baby Wildlife Tip #2:

## MAMA KNOWS BEST

If you come across baby animals on their own, don’t assume they’re orphaned; the mother (and father, for some species) may simply be out finding food. Animals misidentified as orphans and taken to wildlife rehabilitation centers can have greatly reduced chances of survival, no matter how hard the rehabbers work to save them, says Simon. “We can’t teach them to avoid predators the way their mother would,” she says. “We can’t teach them about their habitat and escape corridors, and how to find food.”

While rabbits, skunks, and certain songbirds seem to have survival skills that are more hardwired, animals such as foxes spend a relatively long time learning hunting and other skills from their parents. For some of these species, post-release survival rates are suspected to be relatively low, Simon says.

Captivity can be fatally stressful for baby birds, so modern rehabilitation standards push for “re-nesting”: using wicker baskets and similar items that can substitute for the original nest. This allows the parents to continue raising their young. (In almost all cases, wild animals will not abandon babies who have been touched by humans.)

One case that Simon handled demonstrates why it’s best to let mama do her thing. A man had called about skunks he thought were stuck in his window well. The rescuer sent to the scene was just getting ready to lift out the babies when the mother suddenly appeared behind her. “The rescuer grabbed one of the babies and held out her hand,” Simon says, “and the mother came right up and grabbed her baby by the nape of the neck and ran off.” Demonstrating fearless maternal instinct, the mom came back again and again, “right down to the last baby.”

➤ **FOR MORE GUIDANCE** on how to tell whether a baby is orphaned, see pp. 20–21.

## Baby Wildlife Tip #3:

### LEAVE THE REHABBING TO THE EXPERTS

If you believe that an animal is orphaned, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator immediately, no matter how strong the temptation to do a little wild parenting of your own. Simon cites the case of a boy on a camping trip who shimmied up a tree to remove a baby raccoon from a nest. After taking the animal home, the boy provided a diet of sugary cereal and other junk food. The raccoon developed rickets; with weak bones and deformed legs, he was unable to climb a tree—normally an easy feat for a raccoon—and was ultimately euthanized.

Rehabilitators use the latest science to formulate diets based on what animals normally eat in the wild. Sue Farinato, an HSUS staffer and licensed rehabilitator, notes that rehabbers once typically gave orphaned cottontail rabbits carbohydrate-rich foods like apples, carrots, and sweet potatoes—until experts learned that baby rabbits can't metabolize them. "Once the rabbits get diarrhea, you frequently lose them," Farinato says. Today, the recommended diet includes herbaceous matter such as dandelions and clover.

Rehabilitators also have access to incubators and other medical equipment, plus specialized housing such as pre-release cages to help animals acclimate to the outdoors. They are trained to handle and raise rabies vector species and have received pre-exposure vaccinations. And they've developed techniques to prevent orphans from becoming too attached to humans—raising them with minimal or no handling or, wherever possible, placing them with other same-aged babies to be raised by wild parents, a technique known as fostering. Without these precautions, imprinting, or animals habituating to humans, can endanger orphans' survival after they're released back into the wild; Simon cites the example of a hand-raised deer who runs up to a hunter.

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▲ **LEARN MORE** about The HSUS's animal care centers at [humane.society.org/animalcenters](http://humane.society.org/animalcenters); to locate a rehabilitator in your area, visit [nwwildlife.org](http://nwwildlife.org) and click on "Need Help."

## Baby Wildlife Tip #4:

### GOT HOUSEGUESTS? TAKE A NEIGHBORLY APPROACH

If a wild family has taken up residence in your home, beware when reaching for the phone book. Many "nuisance" wildlife control companies will remove the animals and—if they don't euthanize them—relocate them to unfamiliar territories, a dangerous and potentially fatal move.

For callers who can't wait for the animals to eventually move out, Simon provides advice on humane eviction techniques such as "creating bad smells and sounds and scare tactics to get the mom to move her young on her own." Most mammals know of other den sites, she says, so the mother can be encouraged to relocate her brood.



If wild animals have taken up residence and you can't wait for them to move out, call a humane-minded company that will safely remove them in lieu of euthanasia or relocation.

Using equipment such as reunion boxes and one-way doors that let animals leave a structure but not re-enter, The HSUS's Humane Wildlife Services program had a 100-percent success rate last year in safely placing wild mothers back with their babies in the Washington, D.C., area. In locations where humane-minded companies aren't available, Simon recommends hiring a handyman; HSUS staff can provide detailed over-the-phone instructions.

If the animals aren't causing any damage to your home, consider giving them a grace period. Raccoons, for example, will move their babies out of a chimney after about six weeks, at which point a chimney cap can be installed to prevent more animals from moving in. Tolerance can yield a rewarding up-close view of young lives unfolding. One man had that chance when a goose laid eggs in the middle of the warehouse where he worked. Worried they'd be destroyed by the heavy machinery, he called Simon for help.

Simon recommended protecting the nest during the goose's month-long vigil. The workers built a wall around it, with a small opening for her and her mate. "He said it was the proudest moment when one day he saw the goose and all the goslings come walking out of this structure," Simon says. The workers stopped the machinery and waited for the family to leave the warehouse and go on their way. It was more evidence that, as with so many cases where the worlds of people and wildlife intersect, a little inconvenience can mean the difference between life and death for animals.

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▲ **FIND TIPS** for choosing a humane wildlife control company and watch a video about humanely evicting wild houseguests at [humane.society.org/magazine](http://humane.society.org/magazine).

# Giving Wild Babies a Fighting

**Whether baby animals are orphaned**, injured, sick, or mistakenly removed from the wild, The HSUS's wildlife rehabilitation centers provide refuge on their road to recovery. At The HSUS's South Florida Wildlife Center, babies are first stabilized in the hospital, then transferred to the nursery. In January 2010, five baby raccoons (below, top left) were admitted after their mother bit a man who had surprised the family by opening a dumpster where they'd taken refuge. (State law required local animal control to euthanize the mother for a rabies test, which was negative.) The babies flourished

in an outdoor enclosure designed to help them transition back into the wild. Each year, more than 400 baby opossums receive highly specialized care in the nursery (below, top right), where an incubator imitates the mother's warm, humid pouch. Baby birds of all species—such as this cat egret (below, bottom)—are also brought to the facility. Because gaining weight too quickly can cause leg problems for birds like egrets and herons, caretakers must monitor their diets carefully.

Up the coast in Massachusetts, The HSUS's Cape Wildlife



## South Florida Wildlife Center

## Cape Wildlife Center



Location: Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Location: Barnstable,



# Chance | Tales from The HSUS's animal care centers

Center cares for an assortment of backyard wildlife and seabirds—even baby turtles (below, top). Last spring, two red fox orphans arrived, vulnerable and scared (below, bottom). Staff placed the kits with a male fox and his son who had been brought in and successfully treated for mange. “His interaction with these three kits was amazing,” says animal care technician Heather Fone. “He would get the food from their bowls and feed each one of the kits before he fed himself.” When the kits were old enough, the family was released together.

Caring for native predator species is the specialty of The HSUS's Fund for Animals Wildlife Center in Southern California, where a 160-foot enclosure enables growing birds of prey to practice flying. The center once served as a way station for a weeks-old, presumably orphaned black bear cub found crying on a rural dirt road. Staff made her feel safe and comfortable during her 24-hour stay, providing a snugly fur garment donated through The HSUS's Coats for Cubs program. The next day, the cub was taken to a facility specially equipped to care for bears.



## The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center



Massachusetts

Location: Ramona, California



# Orphan? Or Just a Latchkey Kid?

Follow these tips to see if your  
backyard babies need help



**At The HSUS's Urban Wildlife office** in Connecticut, field director Laura Simon peppers callers with a series of seemingly unrelated questions: Has a neighborhood cat or dog been seen on the prowl? Did the caller recently patch up holes in his house's siding, preventing a wild mom from returning to her babies? Did he see a dead adult animal nearby, or have an animal trapped and removed for getting into the garbage?

In unraveling the mystery of what, if anything, happened to parents of reportedly orphaned animals, Simon is part biologist and part detective. She asks about the babies' condition: Energetic or lethargic? Plump or thin? Eye discharge or dullness? Difficulty moving? Lice or ticks that would normally be warded off by maternal grooming?

Perhaps the most important clue is the species of the animal in question. While mother rabbits and deer often leave babies alone to avoid attracting predators to the nest, "mother raccoons don't let their young cubs out of their sight for long," says Simon.

Because of these different approaches to raising young, improper species identification can lead to unintentional orphaning. When a woman once called the Connecticut office in hysterics over

fallen baby squirrels, a staffer advised placing the babies in a shallow basket at the base of the woman's recently felled tree and waiting for the mother to return. When the mama didn't show, the staffer suggested bringing the babies inside overnight. With still no sign of the squirrel the next day, the caller took the babies to a wildlife rehabilitator—who discovered they were actually raccoons. Had they been correctly described and identified, the woman would have been instructed to leave the babies out overnight, when raccoons are active.

In almost all cases—unless the animal is injured and in immediate need—the process for determining whether he's orphaned starts with giving one or both parents a chance to reclaim the youngster. After that, the steps vary by species. Mother rabbits, for example, nurse their young for about five minutes just two to three times a day. You can place string in the shape of a tic-tac-toe grid or star over the nest, and recheck your handiwork in 12 hours. If the string has been disturbed yet the nest is still covered with nesting material, all is well. To figure out how to proceed for other members of the animal kingdom, read on.



1. Discover baby rabbits.



2. Devise string test.



3. Breathe sigh of relief to see string disturbed.

## Learning to Fly: Baby Birds

Fledglings, or fully feathered young birds with short tail feathers, are often perceived as orphans when in reality, they're just learning to use their wings—literally, from the ground up. Because songbird babies are fed by both parents, they're less likely to be orphaned; both parents would have to die. Unless a baby appears injured, chirps nonstop, or is in imminent danger—or hasn't been visited by one of his parents in more than 60 minutes—leave him alone.

On the other hand, a featherless or partially featherless bird on the ground may need help; she may have fallen from the nest or been pushed out by siblings. If you can locate the nest or cavity (look in bushes, trees, gutters, vents—anywhere within 20 feet of where the baby was found), simply put the baby back. If the original nest has been destroyed or is too high to access, hang a small woven basket nearby, making sure the basket isn't too deep and allows rain to pass through. Simon uses small wicker baskets from floral shops and dollar stores. "They even look like nests, and if you find they are too deep, then you can put some sticks in there." From a distance, watch the nest diligently for an hour or so to make sure the parent returns. Usually you'll see them come back within 15 to 30 minutes.

For help with baby waterfowl and raptors, consult a wildlife rehabilitator.



## At Mother's Side: Baby Raccoons

Mother raccoons closely supervise their young, rarely letting them out of their sight. Babies seen alone and out of their nest for more than a few hours may be orphaned, especially if they've been crying or chattering consistently. Place an upside-down laundry basket over the babies, or put them in a carrier with the door unlatched but held closed by a stick propped up at a 45-degree angle, which nimble mothers should be able to knock over. Monitor overnight; if the mother does not return, call a wildlife rehabilitator.



## Little-Bitty as a Bee: Baby Opossums

North America's only marsupial, baby opossums are born as embryos, barely larger than a bee and completely naked. They spend about two months suckling in their mother's warm pouch. When they grow to about 3 to 4 inches long, they ride around on her back. An opossum less than 7 inches long (minus the tail) is too young to be on her own; she may have simply fallen off without mom noticing. Take her to a rehab facility.

If a mother opossum is injured or killed by a car, her babies may survive the crash only to die when her milk stops flowing. Put on gloves and check the pouch, then call a wildlife rehabilitator for guidance on what to do next.

## Up a Tree: Baby Squirrels

If a baby squirrel has fallen out of his nest but isn't injured, give the mother until sundown to retrieve him; simply leave the area and keep pets at bay. If it's chilly out or if the baby isn't fully furred, place him in an open shoebox at the base of the tree, with a chemical hand warmer under the baby or a heating pad under the box, set on low and powered by an extension cord.

## Oh, Deer: Fawns

To avoid attracting predators, mother deer hide their newborns, often in tall grasses or brush, feeding and grooming them only a few times a day. Fawns should be left alone unless you know the mother is dead or see the fawn lying on her side or wandering around and crying incessantly. Poor condition and flies may also indicate orphaning.

## The Cutest Parade Ever: Baby Skunks

Skunks have poor eyesight, so babies typically follow their mother in a nose-to-tail line formation. If something spooks mom, like a car or curious dog, they may get separated. Moving slowly to avoid being sprayed, place a lightweight laundry basket over the babies and monitor from a distance. The mother will look for her babies by vocalizing. "She will just wander around and around," says Simon. "And the babies will grunt and the mother will grunt, and she will just keep circling until she finds them." When she does, mom will flip the laundry basket with her nose and collect her babies.

