

Leave Those Babies Alone!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Point #1. We are humans. The human species is long lived and human young take a long time and a lot of attention to reach maturity. How humans live and grow is pretty specific to humans. Point #2. This is the time of year when we will likely see a lot of young wild creatures. Wildlife grows up very quickly, as in days and weeks, not years. Their needs are very specific to their species and for we as humans to try to understand that and assist with it, we are pretty much failures. We know about being human, not about being a young rabbit, opossum or robin. Point #3. Humans have a strong sense of compassion and usually mean very well, but they react to wildlife babies like human babies and that is a big mistake.

Springtime is when wild creatures, including birds, have their young. The likelihood that you or I will see wildlife youngsters in the coming weeks is probably pretty high. You need to remember a couple of things at this time. A young animal by itself is probably not abandoned. Many animals leave their young for sometimes hours at a time. It's to give the adult(s) time to rest and eat. Many young animals have very little scent. To creatures that rely on scent to hunt, these "babies" are virtually invisible especially if they stay still where their parents left them. The parents will come back at an appropriate time to feed it or move it on to somewhere else.

Many species have what we call precocial young. Within a few days of birth, they can move around on their own. In a matter of just a few weeks, rabbits are adequately prepared to live on their own, free from their mother. They may only look a third the size of the adult, but they are quite independent. Certain species of birds are mobile within minutes of hatching. Young turkeys, quail, prairie-chickens and many shorebird species, are up and walking around in just a few minutes and their parents will lead them to locations where they will learn to eat for themselves very quickly.

The important thing to do, when you encounter a small animal in your yard or out in the natural world, is nothing. Observe quietly and move away. If a bird appears to have fallen out of a nest that is in reach you can carefully place it back in the nest, but if it has a fair amount of feathers already on it, it likely won't stay in the nest. Honestly, the best thing is to leave them alone. If this is in your yard and you have pets, try to keep pets away from it. To be starkly truthful, the best thing you could do for all birds at this time is to keep your cats indoors!

Wildlife rehabilitation centers get slammed this time of year with everything from baby sparrows to squirrels, rabbits and fawns. Most of the time, the animals should not have even been picked up. I understand that we try to teach our children to be compassionate around all creatures, and it may be hard for them to understand that a small creature appearing to be alone has not been abandoned. But life lessons aren't necessarily easy lessons. The cartoon world of Bambi and a hundred others make for good story telling, but the real world is far, far different than those fairy tales!

This year rehabilitation centers have an additional issue of dealing with possible Avian Influenza. While the majority of the threat has likely passed through the state, many rehab facilities are still going to be very cautious to protect the birds they may already have in the facility. A couple of things to consider (from a former rehabber): if there is visible injury (blood, etc.) call a rehabber. If a young bird with, eyes closed and few feathers, is on the ground call a rehabber, there are sometimes ways to help even if you can't reach nest. A good Kansas website is: <https://ksoutdoors.com/Services/Rehabilitation>. It contains general guidelines and a list to licenced rehab facilities in the state.