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“I Found a Baby Bird or Animal. What Should I Do With It?”

DWR provides the answers

It isn't unusual to find a baby bird in your backyard this time of the year, or even a deer fawn in town or in the woods.

If you find a deer fawn or an elk calf, the best thing to do is keep your distance from the animal and leave it right where you found it.

“We receive calls every year from people who found an ‘abandoned’ baby bird or mammal and would like us to take care of it,” says Ron Stewart, regional conservation outreach manager for the Division of Wildlife Resources.

“While we appreciate and share the caller’s concern, the best thing to do with a baby deer or elk is to leave it right where you found it.”

Deer fawns

Stewart says birds and mammals use numerous techniques to avoid predation and raise their young.

“Often these strategies make it look like the adults have abandoned their young, when actually they are doing their best to protect their young,” Stewart says. “For example, deer fawns learn to walk soon after they’re born, but they aren’t very coordinated and they aren’t strong enough to run away from predators. So, evolution has added a few safety measures.

“Most of the animals that prey on fawns have a good sense of smell, but they can see only in black and white,” Stewart says. “Deer fawns are born scentless; they don’t have an odor, and the predators can’t smell them. Also, if you looked at a deer fawn in black and white, their creamy brown coats would be the same shade of color as the new grass and leaves. Add a few spots to their coats and they’re well camouflaged.”

Because a fawn doesn’t have a scent and it’s camouflaged so well, hiding the fawn for its first few weeks of life provides it the best chance to survive. “The fawn’s mother will usually move away from the fawn to feed and rest, but she will still remain reasonably close by,” Stewart says. “If she senses danger, such as a human, she will leave the area in hopes of luring the ‘predator’ away from her fawn.”

Stewart says people, who can see a full range of color, often see a fawn in its hiding place. “Since the doe has left the area, many people jump to the conclusion that the fawn has been abandoned, and they pick it up,” he says. “That’s the worst thing you can do; without knowing it, you’ve just taken a fawn from its mother.”

So what should you do if you see a deer fawn or an elk calf in town or in the woods?

“If you see a fawn or a calf, don’t approach it,” Stewart says. “Take a look or a photo from a distance, but don’t approach it. If you get too close, the scent you leave could draw a predator to the animal.

“Numerous studies and observations have also documented that predators will follow human tracks. I’ve watched coyotes and other predators cross a path that someone just walked and immediately turn and follow the path. I don’t know if the predators are curious or if they’ve learned that humans can lead them to food, but if you’ve just gotten close to a fawn, you’ll lead the predator right to it.

“It’s best to stop quite a distance away from the fawn or calf, and then continue past the animal in a loop so the predator follows you around and away from the fawn or calf.”

Finding and petting baby animals is another problem. “The animal’s survival depends on it staying scentless,” Stewart says. “If you touch the animal, you’ve placed your scent on it. That makes it easier for a predator to find it.”

Baby birds

Stewart says birds have also developed strategies for raising their young. When people find baby birds, they often think they need to lend a helping hand.

“Young birds will often leave their nests before they’re able to fly,” Stewart says. “They usually spread out along the branches of a tree and call for their parents to bring them food. Spreading out like this is a ‘don’t-keep-the-eggs-in-one-basket’ type of adaptive strategy.

“It’s not uncommon for a strong wind to blow them off the branch and for people to find them on the ground.

“If you find a baby bird on the ground, the best thing to do is to get it out of the reach of house cats and dogs by placing it on a safe branch. The baby will squawk, and the parents will find it. Most birds do not have a good sense of smell, so picking the baby bird up and placing it back on a branch won’t harm it.”

Stewart also advises you not to feed the bird before placing it back in the tree.

“Trying to hand feed a baby bird is not a good idea,” Stewart says. “Baby birds will eat anything that comes close to their mouths. But birds have a specific diet. Feeding them something that’s not part of their diet could kill them. For example, ‘the early bird gets the worm’ doesn’t work in most cases. Robins are one of just a few birds that can safely eat worms.

“The best thing you can do is let the bird’s parents feed it. They know what the baby bird can and cannot eat.”

DWR offices also receive calls from people who have found a nest with baby birds in it. The callers want to know what to do with the nest.

“The best thing to do is leave the nest where it is, but if you can’t, then relocate it in a nearby tree or another safe place,” Stewart says. “Birds are extremely good parents. They’ll almost always find the spot where the nest is placed by following the sounds of their young.”