

Wildlife Rehabilitation Part II  
Or  
What Do You Do With a Naked Baby?

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So, what do you do when you find a sick, injured, or orphaned wild animal, bird or reptile? Well, first of all, hopefully you have determined that it is truly in need of rehabilitation care. This is often difficult to determine for the untrained good samaritan. There may be obvious injuries apparent, or the animal appears weak, thin and not active enough to escape. For the supposed orphan, taking them out of the wild may not be the best thing for them. Often the mother is nearby waiting for you to vacate the premises before returning to care for her baby. In the case of the deer fawn found in the grass, or the seal pup left behind on the beach, it is often confusing for the public to come upon these animals and not think that they are alone, and in need of care.

In the vast majority of cases, the mother has left the immature kid behind, while she is busy searching for food for herself in order to get enough energy and nutrients to feed the baby with that rich fatty milk. When in doubt leave the baby there, and chances are very good that mom will be right along directly to pick up her precious little package. If after a day or more goes by without interruption, and you find the baby is definitely weaker and still in the same spot, then call the wildlife authorities or the wildlife rehab clinic to report the problem and get some good advice on what to do next. Once baby deer are brought out of the wild they rarely can be reunited with their mothers again and must be hand raised while still keeping them wild and untamed (a monumental task). Baby seals can only be cared for by marine mammal experts and there is a severe penalty for picking up seal pups without a permit. It is best to get permission before hand.

As for baby birds, sometimes the nest has fallen out of the tree and all one needs to do is fasten it or a small box back up and the parents will continue to feed and raise the baby without help. If that ground nesting bird gets picked up and it looks healthy send those kids back to the nest and have them put the baby back. Contrary to popular belief, the scent of humans on a wild animal or bird will not keep the mother from tending to its young. For obvious orphans or injured critters, it is important to perform the rescue, and transport in a safe and proper manner. Calling the wildlife facility is always best, as if any special circumstances are present good advice is always appreciated. Very few wildlife clinics can come pick up these animals as they don't have sufficient staff or funds to have a pick up service. They depend on the public to help transport them from the wild to the rehab facility. An appropriate size cardboard box with a lid, or pet carrier make the best transport container, but in a pinch, I have seen paper sacks, five gallon buckets, and empty Kleenex boxes used with success.

One important thing is that the foundling stays warm enough, or if necessary cooler in warm weather. A dark box is nice because it will reduce anxiety, fear and may even induce a sleepy state, which relaxes and lessens stress. The darkness also keeps the animal from struggling or trying to escape, which will insure freedom from transport injury. The box can be lined with old copies of this newspaper, a towel or available soft dry bedding of grass or leaves. Some ventilation holes should be present, but don't go poking them in while the critter is in the box. If wanted, a perch can be provided but is not usually necessary. Secure the lid well when transporting, as there is nothing more surprising than a big raccoon getting under your stick shift or a red-tailed hawk trying to fly out thru the front windshield while you are driving on the interstate. Don't leave any water in the carrier while in the moving vehicle. They won't drink it then anyway, and it always spills making a wet uncomfortable mess.

It is impossible to give a treatise on animal restraint for so many species in this short article, but the most important thing is your safety first, and then the animals comfort. If it is big, angry or can hurt you call the authorities first for assistance. I carry a sheet or blanket around which comes in very handy. The cloth can be dropped over the top of an animal preventing its obvious escape while keeping it from seeing your hands which can be used as a target for biting or scratching. The critter can then be scooped or picked up and gotten into the box much easier. Smaller animals and birds, especially babies won't usually try to inflict any harm on their rescuer, but they almost all try to get away from you if they can. Plan out ahead of time any escape routes the animal might take as you approach it. Even badly injured, or sick animals can try to prevent their capture, often injuring themselves further or making it more difficult to actually get them some help. It may just be a defenseless infant robin or jay, or it can be a barn owl with sharp talons or that wiley-e-coyote with shiny ivory teeth. You could possibly come into contact with just about anything.

Just realize that without you good samaritans, thousands of sick, injured and orphaned wild animals and birds would not get that second chance at survival. They all thank you ahead of time for caring enough to try to help, and don't forget to donate in any way you can to the rehabilitation centers. Most are non-profit and badly need your assistance in order to continue doing their much-needed work. It is truly a labor of love.