You find a baby bird, bunny, squirrel, turtle, opossum, raccoon or deer. What do you do? The tendency of most good Samaritans is to pick the animal up and take it home with them or into the house.

All wild animals are protected by State and Federal laws that prohibit possessing them as pets. There are fines for having live wild animals (especially birds of prey and rare/endangered species) in your possession, good Samaritan or not.

Special purpose permits can be granted by State and Federal agencies and generally require individuals to demonstrate a level of knowledge and training with the species they are going to posses. This often includes prior supervised experience in handling them. It also may require State and Federal wildlife agencies to inspect and approve the facility where the wild animals will be kept before the permit is granted or renewed.

Still not dissuaded from picking up that baby animal you just found? Well then, read on.

Wild animals do NOT become tamed through social contact with humans. We, as humans, do NOT make good surrogate mothers for wild animals. You ask, “Why not?”

First, wildlife has specific diets to meet their nutritional requirements and special behaviors for survival that have been developed over thousands of years in nature. These diets cannot be easily replicated by humans nor can their natural behaviors be maintained or often permitted in captivity.

Second, once a wild animal has been socialized by human contact, they lose much, if not all, of their fear of humans. It is this fear of humans that is paramount for survival in populated areas.

More urban wildlife is killed by humans and human activities than anything else. Keeping a sufficient distance from humans (both well meaning and otherwise) just as with other predators is essential for their long-term survival.

Third, although wild animals, especially babies, appeal to our emotions to save them because they are so “cute” or pretty, as adults they can be very destructive and even dangerous. Some wild animals become even more dangerous once they have lost their fear of humans.

When a wild animal is an adult animal, what are your options?

You can try to release the animal back into the wild where they never learned to compete and likely can no longer survive.

You may try to place the animal in a zoo or other captive facility where they live out their lives

as something quite different from what they were created to be—free and a part of nature.

However, given the shrinking habitat available for wildlife and limited places for wildlife in captivity, the animal must often be destroyed.

Lastly, wildlife or their external parasites (fleas and ticks) can carry and transmit diseases that affect humans—especially the children that will want to “play” with them.
A wild animal may not be sick when you pick it up, but may become sick along with you, your child, and your household pets.

For an animal that was born in the wild, captivity can be very stressful. A wild animal that is under stress from handling, inadequate housing, temperature and diet, will have a compromised immune system and become more susceptible to any diseases.

This will allow diseases that the animal was successfully fighting before to break out under human care. Our household pets may be carriers of “simple diseases” that they have learned to live with or are vaccinated against. A wild animal may be naïve to this disease and it may become sick while in contact with our housepets.

So what should you do when you come across wildlife?

If it is a baby bird, put it back in the nest or put the nest back in a tree. The parents are around and will take care of it even if you have touched it. If it is a baby bunny, squirrel, possum, raccoon or deer, just leave it where it is. The mother is most likely watching you steel her baby and she will return when it is safe (you are gone and it is dark).

If it is a turtle, help it across the road or take it out of your garden and put it in the adjacent ground cover. Don’t put it in a box or take it home to put in your sand box for the kids.

If you know that the animal’s mother is actually dead, call the State wildlife agent in your district for names of people who have the necessary permits to raise or rehabilitate the animal. Contact them to come and take the animal into human custody.

If the animal is injured, notify the State or Federal wildlife agent to assist or provide you with names of people with permits that can assist. This way, you will have done your best for the animal.

However, if you feel that you must put the animal in a box, or wrap it in a blanket, etc., do so very carefully to prevent further injury to the animal or injury to yourself.

Take the animal directly to a veterinarian, ideally one experienced with wildlife and with permits to work on these animals. He/she will be able to examine the nature and extent of its injuries and determine what must be done.

If you or someone else has been scratched or bitten during the attempt to pick up a wild animal, notify the State wildlife agent, a veterinarian, and your personal physician. You may

have come in contact with a transmissible disease, such as rabies, tularemia, etc.

At times, we all feel compelled to help wild animals that we encounter. After all, it was likely humans that caused the animal's peril. Unfortunately, less human help is most often more beneficial. Usually humans do more harm than good when they intervene in nature.

Bottom line—wild animals do NOT make good pets! Appreciate and enjoy wild animals as a part of nature (urban, rural, or wilderness) at a respectful distance whenever and wherever you have the good fortune to encounter them.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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