

So you found a baby bird, bunny, squirrel, turtle, opossum, raccoon or deer. The nest blew out of the tree, the bunny or turtle was in the garden, the squirrel, opossum or raccoon was in your yard, the deer was laying down alongside a fence....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. Now what?

First you should know that essentially all wild animals are protected by State and Federal laws that prohibit possessing them as pets. There are fines for having live wild animals in your possession illegally, good Samaritan or not. The penalties for possessing live wild animals can be very stiff especially for birds of prey and rare or endangered wildlife species. Wildlife belongs to the people (plural and collectively) not to any individual ...even individual land owners.

Wildlife is held in trust for the people by the State and Federal agencies that are empowered to manage them. To legally have or work with wildlife requires special State and Federal permits and these permits are not handed out to just anyone who wants one.

Permits generally specify 1) the activity allowed such as education, rehabilitation, etc., 2) the types of animals or species that are permitted such as song birds, mammals, etc., and 3) the length of time that the wild animals can be held. These "special purpose" permits generally require individuals to demonstrate a level of knowledge of training with the species they are going to possess. This often includes prior supervised experience in handling them.

It also may require inspection and approval of the facility where the wild animals are to be kept by State and Federal wildlife agencies before a special purpose permit is granted, or renewed. Yes, renewed. Renewal of these special purpose permits may be yearly (Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation) or every three years (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Maintaining records of activities and filling annual reports for the animals covered under these permits are generally required.

Still not dissuaded from picking up that baby animal you just found? Well then, read on. You must appreciate or learn the hard way that wild animals do NOT become tamed through social contact with human, and we as humans do NOT make good surrogate mothers for wild animals.

You say "why not"? First, wildlife have specific diets to meet their nutritional requirements and special behaviors for survival that have been developed over many 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 are killed by humans and human activities than everything 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 human emotions to save them because they are so “cute” or pretty, as adults they can be very destructive and even dangerous to have around and they are no longer “cute.” Some of the wild animals become even more dangerous to humans, once they have lost their fear of humans.

So now that you have the adult animal, what are your options? Well you can try to release the animal back into the wild ...where they never learned to survive and likely can no longer successfully compete in. 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, all too often given the shrinking habitat available for wildlife and limited places available for wildlife in captivity, the animal often must be destroyed.

Lastly, wildlife or their external parasites (fleas and ticks) can carry and may 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 house hold pets.

For a wild animal that was born in the wild, captivity can be very stressful. A wild animal that is under a lot of 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 carrier of “simple diseases” that they have learned to live with or are vaccinated against, but a wild animal may be naïve to this disease and it may become sick while in contact with our house pets.

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 steal her baby and she will return when it is safe (you are gone and it is dark out).

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 and get names of people that have the necessary permits to raise or rehabilitate the animal. Contact them and let them take the animal into human custody.

If the animal is injured, either notify the State or Federal wildlife agent to assist or else to provide you with names of people that have 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., then, do so very carefully so as not to injure the animal further or get injured yourself. Then, take the animal directly to a veterinarian, ideally one that is experienced with wildlife and has the permits to work with them, where they can examine the nature and extent of its injuries and determine what must be done.

In the case you or someone else has been scratched or bitten during the attempt to pick up a wild animal, you should notify the State wildlife agent, veterinarian, but also your personal physician, since you may have gotten 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 or contributed to the animal's peril. Unfortunately less human help is most often more beneficial as far more times than not, humans do more harm than good when they intervene in nature.

Bottom line, wild animals really 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. Rejoice in the fact that these creatures are able to be and live free, and realize that it is because they are free they are able to do and be many things that we humans cannot.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital. The large volume of questions does not allow individual direct responses to specific email questions so please watch for your answer in the column. Email your questions for the column to dvmoncall@postoffice.cvhs.okstate.edu and watch for your answer.

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