

# Put Those Babies Back

Wildlife rehabilitators receive numerous orphaned or injured baby animals annually and the most difficult wild baby animal to save is the cottontail rabbit. If you stumble on a seemingly abandoned nest of babies, unless you know the mother is dead, the best thing you can do is LEAVE THEM ALONE. Many people mean well when they contact us after discovering an “abandoned” nest of wild rabbits. Often they wish to “rehabilitate” them with some advice from others. The reality is that fewer than 10% of orphaned rabbits survive a week, and the care that people attempt to provide is illegal, likely unnecessary and potentially deadly. Causes of death for these animals are intestinal bacteria, trauma and improper temperature. Simply the stress of being taken from their outdoor home can also cause their death. As a means of deterring predators from seeing where her nest is, a mother rabbit will not stay in the nest with their babies. She is nearby and will go to the nest only twice a day to feed, at dawn and dusk. A mother rabbit's milk is very thick and rich and she nurses each baby approximately 5 minutes at each feeding. Baby rabbits can even go 24 hours between feedings. If the babies have been pulled from the nest (such as by another animal), remake the nest using the dried grass and mother rabbit's fur. Place the babies back in the nest (it's fine that you've touched them, the mother will still come for them), lightly cover it with more dried grass and, in a tic tac-toe style, lay small twigs on top of the nest for one night. Check the nest the next morning. If the sticks have been disturbed, the mother has returned to the nest to feed her babies—or sensing it to be a dangerous location, may have moved them. If the sticks have not been disturbed then remove the babies from the nest, put them in a small container, keep them warm and contact a wildlife rehabilitator immediately. Do NOT attempt to feed the babies yourself.

If you've destroyed a rabbit's nest as a result of cleaning out gardens or cutting down a tree, etc., dig a 3 - 4" hole no more than 10 feet away from the original nest, gather the nesting material and place it and the babies in the new nest. Again, use the tic-tac-toe instructions previously mentioned. The mother rabbit will hear the babies calling and find them for the purpose of feeding and possibly relocating them. If the nest is in the middle of your yard and you have a dog or cat, first try to keep them inside for a while, or, for the dog, on a leash. Since the mother only visits in the early morning and evening hours to feed, you can cover the nest with a breathable container (like a wicker laundry basket) and weight it down so your dog or cat can't move it. But still supervise your animal. Remove the basket in order for the mother to feed the baby. Or, you can place chicken wire around the nest with stakes. During the days when children and animals are outside, keep the wire down. In early evening, lift the wire all around about 12 inches so that mom can come to nurse at night and again in the morning. Older baby bunnies who are found outside of the nest may not be orphaned or in need of assistance either. This is most often the case. Cottontails are born without fur but develop a full coat in a week. Their eyes open in 10 days, and in three to four weeks they are weaned. They may explore the world outside of the nest but return there to sleep.



## **Bernards Township Health Departmen**

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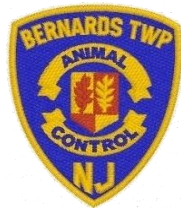


To determine whether a baby outside the nest needs assistance, first see if the baby feels cold to the touch. Also look for bleeding, fly larvae, broken limbs; if any, get to a wildlife rehabilitator immediately. If he is just out and about, leave him be. He is discovering his world, waiting for his mother to return at night. Don't assume because he is letting you pick him up, that he needs help. Rabbits are prey animals, taught to freeze when a predator (or human) approaches. Leave him be! It is a matter of his or her survival and up to us to leave nature be and

let the mother care for her young. Even if the weather is bad and you feel sorry for them, etc... these are wild rabbits and belong out there. Do not take the babies from their mother. She will be frantic. It's not unheard of for a mother to come back night after night looking for her missing babies.

So, remember...

- 1) Take time to assess the situation. Are they really orphaned? Do they really need your help?
- 2) If orphaned, take them to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator immediately, do NOT attempt to care for the babies yourself.



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