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# Reuniting Young Wild Mammals with Their Mothers

*Successful reunions benefit wildlife and caregivers*

By Bridget Sparks and Shirley J. Casey

**B**y definition, wildlife rehabilitators assist wildlife in need to ensure their best chance of survival when returned to the wild. Some people, including rehabilitators, believe that providing care means responding to rescuers by automatically taking animals that are perceived to be in need into rehabilitation. However, not all animals that may initially appear to need help really do. There are many cases when the wildlife rehabilitator can help the animal most by returning it to the wild without ever taking the animal into rehabilitation. This can occur with adult animals that do not need rescue and rehabilitation, as well as with juveniles, that may not have lost their parent(s).

In the case of juvenile wild mammals, the rehabilitator should talk to the rescuer/caller, assess the situation, and decide whether or not to attempt a reunion. If conditions and timing are right, arrangements may be made to try to return the youngsters to the mother. If not, the animals are admitted to rehabilitation. Based on the successful experiences of rehabilitators working with a wide variety of mammals, this article discusses a decision-making process regarding when and how to attempt and arrange a reunion. For the purposes of this article the term juvenile will refer to any animal that is still dependent on its mother for all or part of its care, including neonates, infants, and older dependent offspring.

## Rescue or Reunion?

There are many normal situations in the wild in which a mammal and her offspring may become temporarily separated. With certain species, cottontails and deer for example, the mother animal may leave the dependent offspring alone for long periods to minimize the risk of predation. Often the much stronger scent of the adult mammal can attract predators. Also, the movement of the larger, more visible adult will be more likely to attract predators than the well-concealed young. The adult mammal may simply be away in search of food for herself and possibly her offspring. When alone, the juveniles may either remain hidden or at a den site, or may wander off short distances, even crying out when alarmed or hungry. In most cases, the mother mammal will not be far away and will return shortly, possibly moving her offspring if she feels the site has become unsafe.

There are also many situations when young mammals may be temporarily separated from their mothers by human action, either intentional or unintentional. Mothers may be scared off by humans, their pets, or machines (e.g., lawnmowers, garden tools, vehicles). Some separations are the result of well-intentioned but unnecessary "rescues." Regardless of the circumstances or species, many of these animals can be reunited successfully. If the mother is still in the area and the juvenile is healthy and reasonably safe, a reunion should definitely be considered. While it is not always possible to get the juvenile wild mammals back to their mothers, rehabilitators have demonstrated success in reuniting a wide variety of species, including rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, fox, skunks, and deer.

## Assessment

Many times, the would-be rescuers telephone to ask what to do with a young mammal they have found or if they should bring the animal to the rehabilitator. A quick assessment over the phone is necessary to determine first if the animal truly

**ABSTRACT:** Wildlife rehabilitators are regularly contacted by people who want to bring in a young wild mammal. Sometimes, the animal can be reunited successfully with its mother, making rehabilitation unnecessary. This article describes how rehabilitators can facilitate such reunions, which offer many benefits for both wildlife and rehabilitators.

**KEY WORDS:** Wildlife rehabilitation; wildlife rescue; wildlife reunions; humane solutions to wildlife conflicts; human-wildlife conflicts; wildlife behavior; maternal wildlife care.

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needs to be rescued or if a reunion should be attempted. Young animals that are obviously injured or ill, cold, wet, infested with fly eggs or maggots, at risk from hazards such as cats, or have been fed inappropriately by the rescuer need to be taken into rehabilitation. If the youngster is severely dehydrated it is less likely that the mother will return and a reunion should not be attempted.

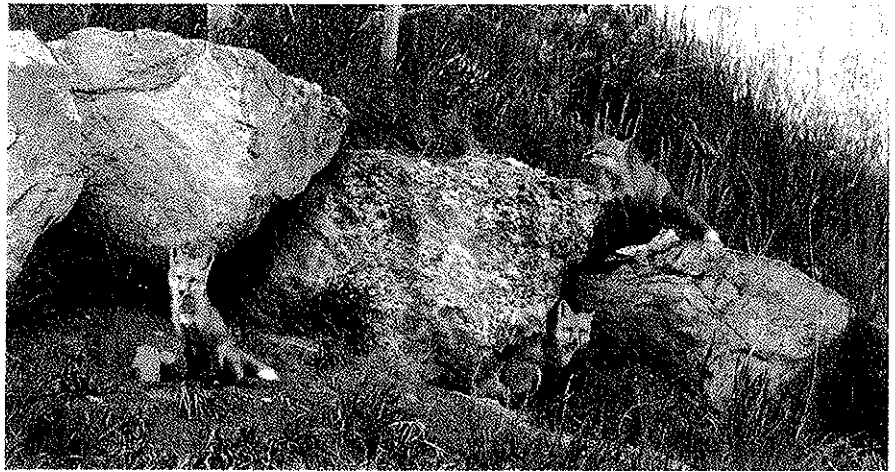
Animals that have bitten people or domestic animals, or otherwise exposed them to a zoonotic disease, will need to be handled according to local and state health regulations. Safety is a very important consideration for both the people and animals involved; in some cases, the risks of danger to the person attempting the reunion or the risk of further injury to the animal may be too high, thus requiring that the animal be brought for rehabilitation. Other considerations include the context in which the separation occurred (e.g. homeowner sealed off the chimney with a cap, not knowing young were inside; nuisance control operators destroyed some adults of that species, possibly including the mother; homeowner had state or local agency

### REUNIONS: NO PEEKING

When cleaning out lower cabinets in a very cluttered workbench in the garage, a volunteer for a Colorado rehabilitation facility pulled out a small piece of old rag. Six bright pink jelly beans fell out on her lap. Upon closer inspection she realized they were newborn pinkie mice. She picked the babies up, placed them back on the rag, put the rag back in the cabinet, and closed the door.

After going to wash her hands, she went back to the workbench and just listened. She heard the sounds (squeaks and scratches) of the mother mouse moving her young to a safer place, away from prying eyes.

Later in the day, the volunteer was continuing her cleaning in another part of the garage and saw the same old rag, but now behind some flower pots. This time she just smiled and didn't move it at all. She didn't want to be a repeat offender.



These Red Fox pups are not orphaned. They are just waiting for their mother to return from a foraging trip, and do not need rescue. (Photo by Allan and Shirley Casey.)

trap an adult, possibly the mother, for relocation); whether it is legal to rehabilitate the species, in which case reunion may be the only option other than euthanasia; and availability of rehabilitators to work with that species.

It is imperative that the rehabilitator know the natural history and behavior of the species involved before attempting a reunion. For example, a mother opossum rarely will retrieve her offspring, so a young opossum under seven inches long (excluding tail) found alone should be considered an orphan and a reunion should not be attempted. Having complete information on a species will not only determine if a reunion can be attempted but often the specific way in which it should be handled — the timing, the location, etc. In some cases, some of the litter may be able to be returned to the mother, while others may be in need of intervention, either rehabilitation or euthanasia if the injury is too severe for recovery. There have been many cases in which some of the juveniles in a litter were successfully reunited with their mother while others were rehabilitated or euthanized.

Every rehabilitator must try to assess the judgment, honesty, and accuracy of the observations of the caller. Often the caller may be unaware of all that has happened, may have misinterpreted the situation, may fail to notice critical details, or

simply may not be willing to disclose all of the necessary information. It can be very difficult for the rehabilitator to gather enough information or have confidence in it. Yet this is especially important when working with species that might involve higher risks, such as rabies vector species. It takes considerable skill and judgment for the rehabilitator to be able to evaluate over the phone whether a reunion or rehabilitation offers the best chance for the animal's long term survival. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to have as much and as accurate information as possible regarding the individual animal, its species, and the circumstances involved before attempting either reunion or rehabilitation.

### Motivation and Response

It is useful to step back and remember why the caller has contacted the rehabilitator. Generally, he or she is concerned and wants to provide aid to an animal perceived to need help. Research has shown that most often it is this compassion and concern for the animal that motivates the caller (Siemer). Since the caller has already taken action in finding a rehabilitator (which often takes several calls), has actually placed the call to the rehabilitator, and has possibly even captured the animal, it can be expected that he or she wants someone else to take action as well. If the caller feels the rehabilitator is not knowl-

## REUNIONS: HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

edgeable or concerned, he or she may hang up and try to take care of the animal alone, choosing either to raise or relocate it. Such actions can be risky for the individual animal, wild-life populations, the rescuer, and the rescuer's family and pets. Therefore, it is essential to take the time to discuss the situation with the caller, explaining the animal's natural history (i.e., animals often hide their offspring, most mothers rarely abandon young) and ways to assess if the animal is really in need; offering some humane solutions, alternatives and risks; and describing possible scenarios about the animal's future.

It is also vital to express appreciation for the person's concern for the animal and willingness to seek help. Explaining to the caller that the animal may not need immediate rescue and rehabilitation can require some convincing. When considering motivation, it is important for the rehabilitator to consider his or her own motivation. It may be difficult for some rehabilitators to not want to take in every juvenile wild animal that might be in need. In addition, it can be difficult and risky to try to arrange a reunion (e.g., there might have been some injuries that needed treatment but were not noticed; some predator could kill the juvenile before the mother returns). Plus, sometimes the reunion just does not happen, resulting in a delay in getting care for the juveniles. However, it is still important to attempt a reunion if it is appropriate and has a likelihood of success.

### Who Handles the Reunion

If the rehabilitator determines that the juvenile does not need to be rescued, the next step is to facilitate a reunion. In some cases, it may be appropriate for the caller/rescuer to handle the process. In other cases, the attempted reunion should be handled by a rehabilitator, trained volunteer, or possibly even a wildlife officer in the case of some larger species. The rehabilitator should carefully consider the circumstances, placing a high priority on the safety of all of

The mother cottontail made a very shallow saucer-shaped nest in the middle of the beautifully kept lawn for her seven babies. The homeowner did not see the nest until he mowed the lawn. He was appalled to find that he had killed one baby, severely maimed another, and slightly hurt another.

He gathered up all the babies, healthy, injured, or dead, and rushed them to the rehabilitator. On arrival, four seemed healthy, one had blood on an ear, and two were dead. The rehabilitator cleaned the wound and found it was barely a nick. Upon talking to the homeowner, the rehabilitator realized that he felt responsible and wanted to make up for hurting the babies.

With instructions from the rehabilitator, he returned the remaining four healthy babies and one with the nicked ear to the original nest. He covered them lightly with dried grass and put a light string across the top so he would know if the mother had indeed returned and was caring for the youngsters. He then flagged the area in his yard so he would not mow there until the cottontails had moved on.

The next morning he checked the string. It had been disturbed. He put the string back over the top each morning for a total of three days; the next day it had always been moved. He was then convinced that the mother was caring for her young. He continued to watch the site from inside the house whenever possible and saw the mother several times. Eventually he saw all the babies leave the nest and move to a nearby greenbelt. He happily mowed his lawn again — with a close watch for possible nests.

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the people as well as all the animals involved. For example, if the caller is a child, or if the juvenile animal is old enough to inflict injury, the reunion should be handled by a rehabilitator or trained volunteer, not the caller/rescuer. The rehabilitator also needs to keep in mind the full range of risks and liabilities, local ordinances, and state regulations when talking with the caller/rescuer and act accordingly.

### Timing of the Reunion

The next consideration is the timing of the reunion. It is critical both to minimize separation time and to choose the appropriate time for the reunion. The shorter the separation time, the more likely an animal is to take back its young. However, many successful reunions have occurred even after 12-14 hours if the adult was still in the vicinity. Reunions of diurnal animals (those active during the day, such as tree squirrels) should be attempted during daylight hours. For nocturnal animals (those active at night, such as raccoons), the reunion should be attempted at night. Despite the pressure to reunite the juvenile with its mother as quickly as possible, it may be necessary to wait

until the appropriate time of day (or night) to attempt the reunion. However, if the adult is spotted in the area, the reunion should be attempted immediately since some animals may come out to search for young regardless of the time.

In many cases, the separation time is short and the juveniles are not dehydrated. Should the juvenile need hydration, it should be done by a licensed and trained rehabilitator with a hydration fluid such as lactated ringers. The level of dehydration and other physical conditions should be considered in determining whether to attempt to return the juvenile to its mother. There have been many cases where juveniles had to be given rehydration fluids and were still successfully reunited with their mothers.

### Minimize Handling

During the time between the "rescue" and reunion, there are several reasons for the caller or rehabilitator to minimize human (or pet) contact with the juvenile. Human scent on the young may increase the adults' anxiety about the juveniles, thus jeopardizing the success of the reunion. Juveniles are often stressed by human contact and may even die from over-

## REUNIONS: THREE WENT HOME

handling. Also, every time the animal is handled, there is risk of injury to the animal and the human. Thus, juvenile animals should be kept in a warm, dark, quiet, and secure place until they can be reunited with their mother. When the time arrives for the reunion attempt, the juvenile should still be kept warm, quiet, and safe but also easily accessible for the mother.

### Facilitating the Reunion

Once the rehabilitator has determined that a reunion is the best course of action and the appropriate time has arrived, the animals can be placed near where the mother and babies were last together, or actually back in the nest or den.

The juveniles that are going to be reunited with the mother should always be kept together [see Assessment], both to facilitate the mother finding and retrieving all her young as well as for warmth and comfort for the juveniles themselves. If the young cannot be placed directly into the nest or den, it is essential to place them as close to the site of origin as possible so that the mother will be able to find them. If this is not possible, place them in a safe area along a known travel route of the adult.

Young small mammals may be placed in a box with some soft, non-raveling, unscented cloth (such as an old T-shirt). If the juveniles are too young to thermoregulate (maintain body temperature), a hot water bottle placed under the cloth will help maintain body heat (the water may have to be reheated depending on the length of time before the mother retrieves them).

Young of larger species may be placed, without a box, in a safe area as near as possible to the site where they were found. Depending on the ambient temperature, the animals may need to be placed in the sunshine or shade to ward off hypothermia or hyperthermia.

Efforts should be made to make the site safe for both the juveniles and the mother. The mother should be able to get to the location safely and, in some cases, be able to move her

A very anxious woman in the Denver area called WildAgain Wildlife Rehabilitation about 4:30 p.m. one July afternoon. The tree trimmers had just dropped a large branch that held a squirrel nest. The woman had checked it and found four juvenile squirrels. One had a small scratch but other than that they looked uninjured.

The tree trimmers were continuing to trim the tree. The caller wanted to know if she should pick up the nest and bring the baby squirrels to the rehabilitator. When asked if there was any evidence of the mother squirrel, the woman said the mother was in a tree in the neighbor's yard. Clearly the mother squirrel wanted to come back, but the noise and activity of the trimmers kept her away.

The rehabilitator explained that if the noise could be stopped for a while the mother squirrel could retrieve the youngsters. The caller said the trimmers were stopping at 5 p.m. She left the nest on the ground and watched from the window as the trimmers left for the day.

She called back at 7:30 p.m. to say that the mother had taken three of the babies, including the one with the scratch, by 6 p.m., but had not come back for the other. She was instructed to leave it until dark and if the mother had not returned by then to bring it to the rehabilitator. She arrived with the juvenile squirrel at 9 p.m. The basic examination indicated that the animal had several internal injuries; it died shortly after arrival.

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young from the area. Also, the juveniles should be safe from people, pets, vehicles, and weather and not at risk to fall, get stuck, or injured. Here again, knowledge of the species' habitat and behavior is critical to knowing where the best site might be: under a tree, near rocks, in bushes or grass, along the side of the house, etc.

Resist the temptation to feed the juveniles, since it is often the hunger cries of the young that alert the mother to their presence. However, vocalizations may also attract predators so be sure to choose the safest place possible. Noise should be kept to a minimum (e.g., if tree trimmers are taking down a tree and destroy a nest, wait until they are gone or on a long break to put the babies back). Keep all pets indoors or as far as possible from the reunion site.

Humans should watch from a distance, preferably from inside a building or vehicle. Binoculars may be helpful. If the animals are placed outside the original nest/den, the mother will most likely move her young to a safer location. If juveniles are placed back in the original nest/den, it may be necessary to place a string or other light material across the top or opening of the nest for several days to verify that the mother has been in and out (string/material is moved or bro-

ken) and is caring for her young. Whether the young are placed back in or near the nest/den, the site must be checked to ascertain that all juveniles are being cared for. If the area is checked too soon or too often it may interfere with the mother's attempt to retrieve her offspring. However, waiting too long could result in the injury or death of one or more of the young.

There are several considerations in determining how long to wait before considering the reunion attempt unsuccessful and taking the juveniles into rehabilitation. Here again, a thorough knowledge of the species' behaviors, particularly parenting behavior, is extremely important.

With some species, the mother will retrieve her young immediately, moving them to a new site and then preparing the nest/den. Other mothers may build a new nest/den before retrieving the offspring, taking several hours after first realizing her offspring are still alive. Still others will choose to remain at the original nest location, but may not return until the "normal" feeding time.

Consider weather conditions and how they will affect the juvenile's health (dehydration, hypothermia, etc.) and mother's ability to return and locate her young (e.g. high winds



Sometimes the "cuteness" of juvenile wildlife prompts people to want to rescue/kidnap them. This young Mountain Goat does not need rescue. (Photo by Allan and Shirley Casey.)

may interfere with her ability to pinpoint the young's vocalizations). Consider the situation and whether anything happened to interfere with the reunion attempt. For example, if the neighbor lets his barking dog out on one side of the fence just as the mother is attempting to retrieve her young on the other side, the reunion may well be aborted.

#### When Some Are Left Behind

There are cases where the mother animal has taken some of the youngsters back, including some with minor injuries, and not retrieved others. In some cases, the mother may have been frightened, felt unsafe, or was interrupted and was thus unable to return for the full litter.

Several rehabilitators have reported cases where the mother animal has retrieved several and left others, which were then taken to rehabilitators and found to have serious and sometimes mortal injuries or conditions. Those left behind should always be taken to a rehabilitator and closely examined.

#### Benefits

Returning young to their mothers has many benefits for wildlife and rehabilitators alike. Wild mammal mothers can better raise their young than rehabilitators, regardless of how

hard rehabilitators work at it. Wild mothers have the correct milk for their young. They raise their young in natural habitat. They teach their young appropriate survival skills and behaviors, such as seeking food, evading predators, maintaining a territory, finding or creating shelter, and effective vocalization and socialization skills.

In addition, the return of the wild juveniles to their natural mothers reduces the number of animals cared for by the rehabilitator. Taking in fewer animals means the rehabilitator can allocate more time and resources to those animals that truly need re-

habilitation as well as to other activities such as education, building facilities, and fundraising.

Explaining to the potential rescuer when rescue is or is not appropriate also has educational benefits. The potential rescuer learns something about the natural history of wildlife (e.g., that deer leave their fawns lying quietly in the grass so they do not attract predators; that an uncapped chimney is often used as a den site by mother raccoons because they prefer dark, hidden places where the temperature remains fairly constant to raise their young).

In the future the potential rescuer may be sensitized to check an area before landscaping or trimming trees, to keep domestic pets from harming wildlife, and to be more tolerant of local wildlife and their needs. Also, the individual may become more interested in wildlife in general and feel more stewardship for wildlife and habitat. He or she may tell others about this experience and help spread word of responsibility for wildlife.

#### Conclusion

Attempting a reunion between a juvenile wild mammal and its parent(s) can pose a variety of challenges. Accomplishing a successful reunion demands considerable knowledge of the species, natural history, behavior, development, habitat, common injuries or situations, possible risks, and legal constraints. It is

### REUNIONS: A DEER RETURNED

A family camping in Northern California saw a fawn lying in the tall grass near a hiking trail. Convinced that the fawn was abandoned, they immediately picked it up, wrapped the frightened animal in a blanket, and drove it to the Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care facility.

By the time the fawn was handed to Executive Director Cheryl Millham four hours had passed. As she looked at what appeared to be a very healthy fawn, Cheryl asked if they had seen a dead doe. When the answer was "No," Cheryl explained that deer leave their fawns and go away to feed, to avoid attracting predators. The deer seem to instruct the fawns to drop, hide, and stay in one place. This fawn was trying to do just that: lie still and try to be invisible.

Cheryl explained that the fawn needed to go back to exactly where it was found. The rescuers were reluctant, but did as she told them. By the time the rescuers got it back to the exact site, a total of five hours had passed. They moved several hundred yards away and watched with binoculars. Within 30 minutes, the doe had returned to the fawn. The reunion was successful and both walked away safely.

imperative that the rehabilitator be familiar with these topics and consider some possible scenarios in advance, since there is rarely time to gather much information when fast action is required. Information may be available from publications, naturalists, wildlife professionals, other rehabilitators, and other resources.

It also takes time to attempt to return a juvenile wild mammal to its family. Sometimes such reunions are successful, other times a reunion does not occur and the animal must be admitted to rehabilitation. However, such time should not be considered lost, since the opportunity to return the juvenile to its family and give the animal its best chance of survival more than offsets the time spent.

Facilitating successful reunions can also help to reduce the rehabilitator's costs, energy, and need for space, as well as making more time available. While there are some risks of attempting such reunions, they must be minimized and balanced with the benefits of getting the juvenile

back to its family. While there are no guarantees that reunions will succeed, it is worthwhile to consider them.

Many people have considered direct physical care of native wildlife in need to be the primary activity of wildlife rehabilitators. Yet wildlife rehabilitators do much more to help wildlife, ranging from educating the public about the role of different species in the ecosystem and the need for habitat conservation, to offering humane solutions to human-wildlife conflicts. Attempting reunions between juvenile wild mammals and their families is one more integral aspect of wildlife rehabilitation.

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### REUNIONS: RACCOON EVICTION

After hearing scuffling and whimpering sounds in her attic for several nights, a woman went up to the attic to see what was happening. When she turned on the light, she saw an adult raccoon scurry out through a hole under the eaves. On further inspection, she found four fully furred and eyes-open juvenile raccoons wrestling in a corner. She put on heavy gloves and used a broom to scoot them into box with a towel, and then called a local rehabilitator.

The woman demanded to bring the juvenile raccoons to the rehabilitator immediately. The rehabilitator explained that the mother raccoon would really like her babies back and would take them if she was given an opportunity.

At first the woman refused to let the mother retrieve her young since she did not want them to return to the attic. The rehabilitator explained how to make the attic unfriendly to wildlife (ammonia-soaked rags, a light, and a radio turned to an all-talk station) and how to later fix the entry hole. However, the homeowner insisted the babies be removed from the house and after considerable discussion, the rehabilitator agreed to take the juvenile raccoons the next day if the mother raccoon did not retrieve them that night.

The woman reluctantly agreed to place the babies immediately in a box near the tree that the mother raccoon often climbed to get to the roof. The woman agreed to watch from a window in the house. The woman called the rehabilitator back in the morning and said that within an hour of putting the box with the juvenile raccoons under the tree the mother was down inspecting them. The mother raccoon then got them out of the box and they followed her away from the yard.

The woman said she was really touched by how the raccoon mother cared so about her young. She planned to follow the rehabilitator's other suggestions as well, and also sent a donation.

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