

BABY WILDLIFE 101

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Animals of all species sometimes arrive at veterinary clinics without notice. In 2012 I was an undergrad working part-time at a local veterinary clinic. One day three young girls walked in holding a naked baby bird in a napkin nest. My heart sank. I threw out questions like “What now?” “Should the bird go back to their nest?” “Should we—could we—euthanize them?” “Is there someone who could take a baby bird?” to the veterinarian while also frantically searching for options online.

Luckily, the final outcome was a good one. The girls led me back to where they found the bird, and I was able to carefully place the baby back in the nest, where Mom was quick to come and check in.

Veterinary clinics across the province are often the first place the public thinks of when both domesticated and wild animals are in need. Thankfully, since my encounter with the baby bird, more resources have become available to veterinarians, animal care organizations, and the public. When the BC SPCA Animal Helpline opened in 2013 it was intended to provide a centralized point of contact for complaints about animal cruelty. It quickly evolved into a service to address a variety of needs. In 2022 general wildlife help calls represented 20 per cent of the calls to the Animal Helpline.

When it comes to wild animals, the Animal Helpline can:

- Assess potentially orphaned animals to determine if they need help (or if they should be left alone)
- Locate the nearest wildlife rehabilitation centre—the Wildlife Rehabilitators Network of BC’s directory, at www.wrnbc.org, lists all permitted facilities in the province
- Provide general help on a wide variety of wild animal issues including coexistence

Calls about baby wildlife are most common in the spring and summer months—the busy baby season! At the BC SPCA’s Wild Animal Rehabilitation Centre (Wild ARC), approximately 70 per cent of patients arrive between April and September. This is about the same window of time in which veterinary clinics get a lot of calls about baby animals.

Here are some points to consider when you receive a call about a wild animal.

DOES THE ANIMAL EVEN NEED HELP?

Whether it’s a baby bird, squirrel, deer, seal, raccoon, or skunk, a baby animal’s best chance for survival is with their mother. A baby animal that is alone isn’t always in trouble. Often, the human finder won’t need to do anything at all. But if the baby is hurt or sick, or the finder knows for sure the mother is dead and the baby isn’t old enough to be on their own, the best option is to find a wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. If a wildlife rehabilitator isn’t available, the next best option is humane euthanasia to prevent further suffering.

You can also advise people to call the BC SPCA Animal Helpline to help assess the situation. The BC SPCA’s website—www.sPCA.bc.ca—has a number of infographics showing common baby scenarios, including “Found a baby bird,” “Found a deer fawn,” and “Found a baby seal.”

WILL MOMS REJECT THE BABY IF THEY SMELL LIKE PEOPLE?

Birds have a poor sense of smell and will not reject babies touched by people. This means a human may be able to place baby birds back in their nest. Mammals have a much keener sense of smell but are also very dedicated parents. A reunion under the guidance of a wildlife rehabilitator may still be possible even when babies have been handled.

DO THEY NEED FOOD OR WATER?

A member of the public should never give water or food to a baby animal unless instructed to do so by a wildlife rehabilitator because this can often cause more harm than help. Water can even be an environmental hazard. For example, if the water spills during holding or transport, a wet and cold baby could quickly become hypothermic. Similarly, if the baby has any balance issues or trouble staying upright, their head could droop into the water, causing the animal to drown, even in a shallow dish. As with feline and canine patients, it’s best if wild patients arrive with their systems clear of any food in preparation for treatments they may need.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

Many veterinary clinics provide invaluable services as temporary drop-off locations for patient transfers and/or emergency euthanasia for wild animals in critical distress. Veterinarians who build a relationship with a permit-holding wildlife rehabilitator will help more wild animals get the professional care they need to return home to the wild.

The BC SPCA Animal Helpline—1-855-622-7722—is open from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., seven days per week. [WCV](#)

“...A BABY ANIMAL’S BEST CHANCE FOR SURVIVAL IS WITH THEIR MOTHER.”