

Kids Korner

Wildlife Is Best Left Alone

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — People often encounter young animals who appear to be wounded or abandoned in the spring. If you run across one of these baby animals, it's usually best to leave it alone, says a wildlife biologist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Even with good intentions, people often do more harm than good trying to take care of young animals," said Margaret Brittingham, associate professor of wildlife resources. Most commonly encountered are rabbits, birds, and fawns.

"Rabbits often nest in little depressions in lawns or the sides of yards," Brittingham said. "The female nurses the young in the morning, covers the nest, then leaves until dusk. That's why baby rabbits often appear to be abandoned."

But rabbits periodically return to check on their young. If the nest has been disturbed, the adults will move it.

"Once my dog came upon a rabbit's nest in the yard," Brittingham said. "I took her inside, returned to the nest two hours later, and the young already had been moved."

If you suspect that young rabbits have been orphaned, some experts suggest taking a string and making a circle around the nest and an "X" over it late in the afternoon. The next morning, check the string. If it's disturbed and the babies seem well, the mother has returned.

If the mother has been killed, the young animals may need help.

Brittingham recommends calling a local wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. People aren't allowed to raise baby animals without a permit. To find the nearest wildlife rehabilitator, call your

county extension office.

"Many people often see young, flightless birds sitting alone and want to carry them inside," Brittingham says. "But birds are very hard to raise. It's almost always better for the bird if you leaved it in a safe place and hope the parent returns."

"Sometimes the bird actually has left the nest but can't yet fly," she says. "If you're concerned about cats or predators, move it to a safe place, like a bush or low branch. It's a myth that the mother won't return to a baby bird after a human has handled it."

Occasionally young birds fall from nests. "In that case, you can try returning it," says Brittingham. "A fallen nest with eggs can be placed high in a shrub or tree. But a fallen egg is probably a lost cause."

People occasionally find baby deer in the woods. "Often the fawn hasn't been abandoned," Brittingham says. "Deer, like rabbits, leave their young alone for long periods of time. But if you know the mother's been killed, contact the Game Commission."

Brittingham urges people to remember that they can be injured aiding wildlife. Animals sometimes bite out of fright. To avoid being bitten or scratched, she suggests being cautious and wearing gloves. "You want to be particularly careful handling squirrels," she says. "They're very aggressive and have very sharp teeth."

"And never handle raccoons," she stresses. "Many raccoons in Pennsylvania carry rabies. If you see raccoons around your house, you should modify what's attracting them. Raccoons often feed on cat food or garbage cans. Make sure garbage cans are secured and garage doors are closed, and don't leave food outside."

A Good Snake Is A Live Snake

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Ask people what they'd do if they saw a snake in their yard and most will say, "Kill it!" But a wildlife biologist from Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences has other ideas.

"People shouldn't kill snakes — they're extremely good mousers," said Gary San Julian, professor of wildlife resources. "By reducing the rodent population, snakes reduce the potential for diseases such as hantavirus and Lyme disease. Rodents chew the insulation off of wire, causing short circuits and fires. Rodents also can do tremendous damage to agriculture, ruining billions of dollars of grain each year worldwide."

Pennsylvania has only three poisonous species of snake — the timber rattlesnake, eastern massasauga rattlesnake and northern copperhead. The massasauga is found only in a few western counties.

"You can determine whether a snake is poisonous by looking at its eyes," San Julian said. "Nonpoisonous snakes in Pennsylvania have a circular pupil, while poisonous snakes have a vertically slitted pupil, like a cat."

If you don't want to get that close, San Julian suggests looking at the head. "Nonpoisonous

snakes tend to have a round head," he says, "while poisonous snakes' heads are more triangular. The exception is water snakes, which — although nonpoisonous in Pennsylvania — can flatten their heads to a triangular shape when provoked."

If you still can't co-exist with snakes in your yard, San Julian has some suggestions. "You've probably watched the old movies where cowboys put a rope around their bedroll to keep snakes away," he says. "We've tested common folk preventatives, such as rop, moth balls, gourd vines, sulfur, artificial skunk scent and sticky materials, and the snakes passed freely through them. Your best bet is to make the environment inhospitable for snakes."

Snakes come into yards for a number of reasons, he says. "They like cover, so you may want to clean up old trash piles or messy woodpiles. You also should keep the grass around your house cut short. Snakes aren't likely to stay where the grass doesn't provide cover."

"You also should remove food sources for mice, because snakes come around looking for mice," he says. "Don't leave excess food out inside your house, and clean up the old food around bird feeders."

Homeowners should plug the holes in house foundations, and any places where utilities come through concrete walls. Animals such as snakes and mice may come inside out of curiosity; others are looking for food or a place to nest. You also should make sure screens are sealed.

If you find a snake in your basement, some experts suggest laying damp burlap bags in a corner or along a wall in the basement, then waiting for snakes to burrow under them and hide.

If you find a snake skin in your house, San Julian says you usually can assume the snake has gone. But if you want to be certain the snake wasn't poisonous, look under the tail. "Poisonous snakes have a single row of scales below the vent, while nonpoisonous snakes have two," he says.

Any snake you see probably wants to get away from you more than you want to get away from it," San Julian says. "If you don't like snakes, it's easy to stay out of their way. I've spent more than 25 years tromping through the woods in seven states — some that have more poisonous snakes than Pennsylvania — and I've only seen three or four poisonous snakes. They're very elusive. You really have to be looking for them."

FIND THE TWINS

WHICH TWO ARE EXACTLY ALIKE?

ANSWER TWO AND FOUR

Birdbrain Behavior

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Birds are hurling themselves against windows, hammering on drainpipes and pecking on glass. Don't let it get to you — it won't last much longer, said a wildlife biologist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"At the beginning of the breeding season, birds are establishing territories," said Margaret Brittingham, associate professor of wildlife resources. "They're singing, displaying and telling all of the other males of their species to keep out."

When a bird sees his reflection in a window, he thinks it's an intruder. So he "displays" to try to get the intruder to leave. "Of

course the 'intruder' displays back, and the bird gets madder and madder until he starts pecking on the glass."

To some people, this behavior can be quite annoying, she says. "One caller had a robin at her work window, pecking nonstop and hurling itself against the glass. Another caller had a mockingbird on her car, pecking like crazy at the side window."

The best bet is to wait it out. Once the birds breed, the male hormones will drop and they'll become less aggressive.

"You can always try putting a large rearview mirror in your yard — like the kind from a truck," she adds. "You may be able to draw

the bird's attention to the new intruder."

Another complaint Brittingham hears this time of year concerns woodpeckers. "Woodpeckers drum to set up territories and attract mates, and one of the most resonant items to drum on is a drainpipe or rain gutter," she says. "At 5 a.m., it really can drive people crazy."

To scare them off, Brittingham suggests hanging streamers or Scare-Eye balloons. "Scare-Eye balloons have giant eyes on them," she says. "You can buy them at garden supply centers. They only work for short periods of time, but that's all you'll need."

Smart Stuff

WITH TWIG WALKINGSTICK

Why do bees and wasps sting?

These insects sting to defend themselves and to kill other insects for food. But, to understand which sting for self-defense and which sting for food, you have to know what kind of stinging insect it is.

The honey bee, for instance, will only sting when it feels threatened. A honey bee's stinger is serrated — that means it's jagged and looks like a saw blade. So, the stinger gets stuck in your skin. The body of the bee rips away from the stinger when it tries to free itself. Honey bees die shortly after this happens. The female worker bee is the only honey bee that can sting.

Wasps and yellow jackets will also sting for self-defense, but the main use of their stinger is to kill other insects for food. The venom, or poison, from their stinger will kill the insects that they eat. Wasps and yellow jackets vary in size and are less hairy than honey bees. According to our entomology friends at Ohio State, wasps and yellow jackets are the most common bees around your school. These flying pests will sting if you bug them, and sometimes they sting for no reason at all. The same wasp or yellow jacket can sting you many times, because the stinger is smooth and slender like a sewing needle.

So, watch out for these flying pests. They may sting you if they feel threatened.

Scientifically yours,
Twig

WASP

BEE

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Have a question?
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