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CENTERPIECE

Wildlife rescue centers want to remind residents baby animals are best left alone

By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star May 4, 2017



Photo provided by the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center

This fox kit and two siblings were found beneath a shed, assumed to be abandoned and in danger from a dog.

BOYCE — Wildlife rescue centers are overwhelmed with animals this time of year, when well-meaning individuals take baby animals from their nests and hiding places in an effort to “save” them.

“It is abduction,” said Dr. Jen Riley, director of veterinary services at the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center in Clarke County. “Babies are best left with [their] moms in all species.”

Riley said many people call the center to say they found a baby animal. “Finding something isn’t a reason to take the animal.”

Riley strongly encourages people to call the center with questions about wildlife.

“It’s generally best to call us. Only one out of 10 phone calls result in an animal being brought in,” she said.

On Tuesday, there were 134 animals at the center, Riley said. Fewer than 30 were adults. The majority of babies were Eastern cottontail rabbits and Eastern gray squirrels. “Song bird babies will come in like crazy this month,” said Riley.

“Mom being absent does not mean she’s abandoned her baby or has died,” Riley said.

Mother rabbits are often away from their nests from dawn to dusk, she said. They will not return to their nests if humans are nearby.

If they feel threatened or feel their young are in danger, many wild animals will move their babies to safer dens as they normally have multiple sites. Practicing tolerance and leaving wildlife untouched gives wild babies the best opportunity to be raised by the best caregivers — their parents.

Songbirds co-parent, so even if the mother is gone, the father will feed the babies.

Fledgling birds will fall out of nests, and that’s part of the process of learning to fly.

"Mom and dad will feed their fledgling on the ground until it flies."

Riley said baby birds that fall out of nests should simply be placed back in the nest.

She encourages people to wear gloves when handling wildlife because gloves protect humans from diseases and scratches. It is a myth that human scent on an animal will prevent its mother from accepting it, she said.

However, she said, there are times when it is wise to take baby animals to the center.

"If you are absolutely certain the mother is dead, call us," Riley said.

Veterinary assistance is also recommended for any wild animal that has been in a cat's mouth or a dog's mouth. Cat and dog bites leave behind germs that cause infections. The veterinary staff at the center can treat wild animals to prevent infections before returning the animals to the wild.

"Even though you may not see a puncture wound, there may be one that closed up," said Riley.

Riley also advises that individuals check branches before trimming trees to avoid displacing the nests of squirrels and birds.

The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a full-service, licensed rehabilitation and veterinary hospital with a surgery and rooms for mammals, raptors, reptiles, birds and water fowl. Outdoor enclosures are used for large birds.

Education is a large component of the center's work.

Located along Tilthammer Mill Road, the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is one of only three licensed wildlife centers in the state and the only one in Northern Virginia.

In an average year, the center's staff cares for more than 2,000 animals, releasing as many as possible in the areas where they were found.

If wild animals look healthy, it is best to leave them where they are — in the wild.

Riley said the rule of thumb regarding wildlife is, "If you care, leave them there."

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Contact the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center at 540-837-9000. Learn more at blueridgewildlifectr.org or follow the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center on Facebook.

— Contact Cathy Kuehner at ckuehner@winchesterstar.com

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