

BABY COTTONTAIL RABBITS

Annually, rehabs across the Midwest take in thousands of baby cottontails. Most of these are not really orphaned, but were “kidnapped” from their nests by well-meaning people. Cottontails are the most challenging animal for rehabilitators to care for because of their delicate physiologies, and so it is crucial to recognize whether or not a baby is legitimately in need of help before bringing it to a rehabber.

Cottontails are easily stressed and are notorious for literally dropping dead from fear. With this in mind, baby cottontails should be handled as little as possible.



Cottontails nest in shallow depressions in the ground. Because of the rather conspicuous locations of these nests, dogs and cats frequently discover the babies and destroy the nests. Cottontails are ready to leave the nest when they are about three weeks old (although they continue to nurse). If possible, we suggest that concerned pet owners



keep their animals indoors or on leashes for just this short amount of time until the babies are out of the nest. If pets won't stay away, one option is to cover the nest site with an upside down wheelbarrow, so that Mom can still slip under to feed the babies, but the dog can't. A lawnmower can be used as well, just roll the mower right on top of the nest (turned off obviously) and park it there. The mother rabbit will be able to get in to nurse her babies, but pets will be denied access.

Most importantly **DO NOT MOVE THE NEST!** Mom will not return to a nest that has been moved even a few inches from where she put it. On the bright side, these babies will be out of your hair in 3 weeks, so if nothing else, keep the dog on a leash for a little while and they'll be gone then.

How to Tell if Bunnies Truly Need Your Help:

- It is **hairless** and out of the nest
 - It is **cold** and **lethargic**
 - It is covered with **parasites**
- It is **dehydrated** (pinch a fold of skin off the animal's back; if it snaps back immediately, the baby is fine - if it takes a few seconds, the baby is dehydrated)
 - It has been in a dog or cat's mouth
 - It has a broken limb
 - It exhibits abrasions or bruises
 - It is gasping or gurgling
 - Its head is tilted
 - It is bleeding
 - Its fur patches or flaps of skin are hanging loosely
 - It is unable to stand or move without falling over

If the baby exhibits any of the signs listed above, it should go to a rehabber immediately.

BI-STATE WILDLIFE HOTLINE OF MISSOURI & ILLINOIS - (636) 492-1610 OR TOLL FREE 1-800-482-7950
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“ABANDONED BABY BUNNIES”

If you suspect that the baby is an orphan, but it doesn't exhibit any of the sure signs listed above, try putting it back in the nest. The idea that the mother will reject the babies if they smell like a human is a myth. If the nesting material has been displaced, it should be rearranged to keep the babies warm until the mother can fill it in.

Place a string (sewing thread or yarn) in a circle around the nest and in an “X” over the top. Leave the nest for 24 hours, then return to check the string. If it has been disturbed, the mother has been to the nest to nurse. Continue to keep pets away for a week or two and mow no closer than 2 feet. If there is no evidence of the mother, call the Wildlife Hotline for further instructions.

Remember: Mother rabbits only visit their nests **very briefly** to nurse and then leave as soon as possible to avoid attracting predators (this includes you) to the area. She comes at dawn and at dusk, so you will most likely not see her during the day. She will also not come if you are hovering nearby. Keep your distance or the babies will starve. Since cottontails are independent at such a young age, many people think that they have found an orphan when, in reality, they have just stumbled upon a beginner who needs to be left alone. If the baby is fuzzy, its ears are erect, it is about the size of a tennis ball, and it has no apparent health issues, this is most likely the case.



Baby cottontails have a significantly higher chance of survival with their mother than with any rehabbers. The mother produces a fatty acid in her milk that combines with enzymes in the baby's stomach that keep the gut nearly sterile. This action is impossible to reproduce. If baby rabbits are fed commercial milk products they develop enteritis (intestinal inflammation), a condition from which they rarely recover. If you are in doubt about the injured or orphaned status of a baby cottontail, the best decision for the animal's survival is to leave it alone.

Getting Bunnies to Rehab

The animal should be gently placed in a box lined with a paper or non-terrycloth towel. Hairless babies need a heat source immediately. You'll need a heating pad, set to medium, place under **HALF** of the shoebox or small container so the bunnies can get away from the heat source if they really want to. If you do not have a heating pad, you can make something similar in two minutes. Using a men's long sock, or a knee high nylon, and fill the sock with dry rice – any kind, just uncooked. Microwave the sock filled with rice for 1-3 minutes until it is very warm to the touch but not scalding. Place the rice sock in the shoebox or other small container under the bunnies, making sure that they are not directly on top of the sock.

Remember: Remember the reaction that rabbits have to stress, and limit your handling to only what is necessary. Make sure you keep the bunnies somewhere quiet and leave them alone as much as possible. Everyone will want to see them. They are adorable. Don't give in – Tell people that they'll die if everyone keeps messing with them. **DO NOT** give any food or water.

Note: Cottontails can carry a disease called tularemia that is contagious to people. Wash your hands well after handling bunnies.