

## Saving Wild Baby Rabbits

The best chance for survival of a wild baby rabbit is to leave it in its nest, where the mother will return to take care of it. If you find a wild baby rabbit, let him be, and do not attempt to "rescue" him. Mother cottontails feed their babies only once or twice a day, and then stay as far away from the nest as possible, so as to avoid attracting predators.

Mama rabbit will be calling for the baby you think is abandoned. No matter how cute and helpless he looks, if he appears healthy, leave him alone. If you disturbed a nest, just remake it. If you touched the baby, that doesn't matter. Put back in the general area in a safe place. Mama comes back only at night, when you are not looking.

If, however, you find ANY injured animal, or a truly orphaned wild baby (you can confirm that the mother was killed), contact your local humane society/animal control. Do not attempt to feed the babies, as the physiology of their digestive tract is incredibly complex and sensitive. Feeding anything can definitely do more harm than good.

If the baby appears injured, and it's after normal veterinary hours, try to call an emergency vet who can administer treatment. To find a vet in your area who is experienced in treating rabbits, go to:

<http://www.rabbit.org/care/vets.html>

and/or

[http://www.morfz.com/PB\\_vets.html](http://www.morfz.com/PB_vets.html)(Vets Global)

Orphaned wildlife species have very specific dietary and care needs. They need a skilled wildlife rehabilitator to help them survive. Do not feed formula yourself or keep the rabbit as a pet! A baby cottontail needs the right formula twice a day only, and is extremely fragile.

To find a wildlife rehabilitator in your area, first call your local Humane Society, and then check the following web sites for vets/rehabilitators:

<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~devo0028/contact>

[http://www.morfz.com/PB\\_vets.html](http://www.morfz.com/PB_vets.html)(Vets Global)

Without a professional, wild babies mostly die. If you have found a true orphan, house it in a small pet carrier or sturdy cardboard box on soft towels until you can get it to the rehabilitator or vet. Safe foods to include in the box are timothy hay, dandelion greens, parsley, carrot tops, carrots, grated very small.

If you have more questions about orphaned rabbits, please go to:

<http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/orphan.html>

If all else fails, here is an article on saving baby wild rabbits that might help. Good luck!

Dana

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The following information is from:

V. Johnson, P. Adams, P. Goodrich and R. Haas, 1991: "Wild Animal Care and Rehabilitation Manual", 4th Edition, Kalamazoo Nature Center, 42-45. ISBN 0-939294-16-8.

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## RABBITS IN THE WILD

Just prior to birth of a litter, the female prepares a nest which may be underground or in a concealed, grass-lined cavity under vegetation.

She lines the den using fur plucked from her abdomen. The newborns (1 to 8) are born with their eyes closed and their ears flat against their heads. They are not born with fur, but within a week they have a full coat. The eyes open 6 to 10 days after birth.

The babies are nursed about twice a day, for the first two weeks, usually once in the morning and once in the evening.

Baby cottontails leave the nest at 2 to 3 weeks and learn to nibble tender grass shoots. They leave the nest for good when they are about 3 to 4 weeks old. They may remain in the nest area.

The question is often asked: Will the mother rabbit return if the nest has been disturbed? We believe that there is no absolute rule followed by

mother rabbits. The maternal instinct is strong, and she probably will return to feed 2 to 3 times within a 24-hour period if the nest has not been drastically disturbed.

There have been recorded observations of mother rabbits returning to care for very young rabbits when the nest was mildly disturbed, and there have been observations of abandoned young after some mild or severe disturbance of the nest. We urge people to stay away and leave the nest alone for 24 hours before making a decision. If young are warm and healthy at this point, the mother has been returning. If the young feel cold and appear thin or dehydrated, she probably has not been returning, and it is time to take the rabbits to a rehabilitator.

## WHAT TO DO FIRST

When you receive a litter of rabbits, their temperature is immediately important. A rabbit's normal temperature is higher than yours; if the babies do not feel warm, you should get the temperature back up to normal as soon as possible. Raise the temperature slowly by placing the babies in a small box lined with soft towelling and place a heating pad (set on warm) under the box; or use a warm hot water bottle wrapped in towelling. Leave the babies there until they feel warm to the touch.

If the rabbits' skin tents when pinched lightly and they appear weak and listless, the babies are dehydrated. After they regain their normal body temperature, they should be given (just a few drops if they are newborn) hydrating solution every 15 minutes for the first hour. Commercial hydrating solutions (e.g., Pedialyte or Gatorade) may be used, or you can make your own solution by combining 1 teaspoon salt and 3 tablespoons sugar in 1 quart warm water. When the babies are warm and hydrated, prepare housing, and begin a normal feeding schedule. Always try to raise rabbits in groups of two or more. If you have a single rabbit, you might want to place a piece of fake fur in with the rabbit to act as a surrogate companion. A pocket watch wrapped inside the piece of fake fur will simulate the sound of a heartbeat. Most fake fur is machine washable, but it should not go into the dryer.

## HOUSING

If the rabbits' eyes have not yet opened, prepare housing by lining a small box or laundry basket with newspaper and then add flannel or towelling. Sweatshirt fleece from a fabric store is a good substitute for towelling. It is fairly inexpensive, is quite soft, and doesn't have the loops that terry cloth has. The sides of the box must be higher than for other

mammals, because even baby rabbits can jump very high. Place the box in an area away from drafts and in a quiet place because rabbits are easily frightened.

Young rabbits with their eyes not yet opened need to be supplied with supplemental heat. This heat source may be provided by using either a heating pad OR an ordinary 60-watt light bulb.

If a heating pad is used, place the pad outside and under 1/4 to 1/3 of the box and up one side. This allows warmth when needed but escape if too warm. Start the pad on low heat and use your hand to feel the warmth coming through the bottom of the box; the box should feel warm, not hot. The temperature for the very young should be 95F.

If a light bulb is used, hang an ordinary 60-watt bulb near the box and position the light over one end of the box so that the temperature will vary from one end to the other. Feel the bunnies periodically to make sure the light bulb is keeping them warm. If not, switch to a heating pad. Cover the babies so that the light doesn't dry out their skin.

Some rehabilitators use a heating pad at night and a light during the day to help the animals learn about the normal day and night cycles. NEVER use both a light and heating pad at the same time.

The heat source can be removed when the bunnies are furred and beginning to eat on their own. Gradually eliminate the supplemental heat (e.g., several hours a day, removing the night heat last). After you have removed the heat, monitor the rabbits to be sure they are maintaining their body heat. If they aren't, reintroduce the supplemental heat.

The size and depth of the box should be adjusted as the rabbits become larger and better jumpers. Rabbits can jump surprisingly high at a very young age.

Place fresh, chemically free clover, dandelion greens, and Queen Anne's Lace in the box from the beginning so that the first sights and smells will be natural. The box should be cleaned twice a day and all greens removed and replaced once a day.

If the rabbits are housed in a cage when they are young and still inside, make sure the cage is elevated off the floor so that the urine can drain freely.

Baby rabbits seem to like being covered with a soft piece of material until

they are eating on their own. Their natural instincts are to be under or inside a shelter.

As the eyes open and the rabbits become more mobile, they should be housed in a larger, portable cage. This cage should be large enough for the rabbits to get plenty of exercise, yet small enough so that the cage can be moved back and forth from inside to outside.

During this phase, the rabbits gradually should be getting used to being outside for longer and longer periods of time (acclimatized). This is the appropriate time for them to be weaned (from you and from formula feedings); they should be handled as little as possible. Include in the cage a wide variety of natural foods, natural features (e.g., logs, branches, mounds of fresh soil, etc.), a source of fresh water, and a nesting box.

When the rabbits have been acclimatized and are eating a natural diet, they should be placed in permanent, outside-release housing as described in the RELEASING section in this chapter.

## FEEDING

Use 1 part powdered Unilact to 3 parts warm water plus 2 parts heavy cream. Soy-based infant formula (e.g., Isomil, Nursoy, or Prosobee) mixed according to manufacturer's directions may be used to feed rabbits. Rabbits eat better if the formula is warmed.

Feed the babies with an eyedropper, syringe, or pet-nurser bottle, depending on the size and age of the rabbits. Rehabilitators have had success feeding rabbits by placing a cat replacement nipple on the end of an eyedropper or a 1/2 cc to 3 cc syringe. The cat replacement nipples are available from most veterinary supply companies.

There is no consensus on how often to feed baby rabbits. Some authorities recommend not feeding them more often than every 6 hours. Animal care rehabilitators have had success feeding baby rabbits every 2 to 3 hours from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. when the rabbits' eyes are closed. The time between feedings is lengthened as the rabbits eat more per feeding. We have also had success feeding every 6 hours. A poor eater may require more feedings a day than a vigorous eater. Some rehabilitators have worked slowly up to 6 hours between feedings with healthy vigorous rabbits. With pink, hairless rabbits, feed about 1/2 cc of warm formula every 3 hours. Rabbits with

their eyes tightly closed and ears flat to their head will eat about 2 eyedroppersfull (approximately 2 cc) per feeding. The amount increases as their size and weight increase. The stomach should be full and round -- not tight. The amount also will vary depending on how often the rabbits are fed. Feed slowly so that the formula is not aspirated into the lungs. Food in the lungs increases susceptibility to pneumonia.

Rabbits startle very easily, so be careful when handling them. They can injure themselves jumping suddenly from a rehabilitator's hand.

Note illustration for appropriate feeding position. Check position of rabbits forefeet and head when held.

Do not be discouraged if rabbits do not feed well at the first or second feeding. Rabbits have nervous systems that do not adapt easily to new situations or to changes. That hard syringe or eyedropper in the mouth is difficult to learn to associate with food. Being held in a human hand is also a difficult adjustment as are unfamiliar odors and sounds. Be patient and persistent.

Some rehabilitators use an extra box at feeding time if they are feeding a litter of 3 or more. They feed a rabbit, place it in the extra box (so as to be able to tell which animals have been fed), and do the same for each rabbit in that litter. They then feed the rabbits in reverse order from the extra box back to the nesting box. This procedure is done to make certain each rabbit is fed twice and gets a second chance to fill its stomach.

Some rehabilitators have reported that even rabbits with their eyes closed will nibble on fresh clover, wild carrot greens, and dandelion greens. We recommend adding fresh, chemically free greens to the box daily even if the rabbits' eyes are closed. At this point, continue with regular formula feeding until the eyes have opened.

Following each feeding, rub each rabbit's belly and genital areas with a warm, damp cloth. This usually stimulates the baby to urinate or have a bowel movement; don't worry if it doesn't work every time. Discontinue the rubbing after a minute or so whether or not the rabbit has eliminated. Rabbits over 7 days old do not need stimulation after each feeding in order to defecate and urinate; they will eliminate on their own.

If a rabbit becomes bloated, put the lower half of its body (up to its waist) in warm water, and gently massage its stomach for about 5 minutes. Dry very carefully, and return the rabbit to the nesting box. Do not chill. Within a couple of hours, the bloat should disappear. If the bloat

continues, alternate regular feedings of formula with a feeding using hydrating solution. Contact your supervisor if the bloat continues unabated for more than 24 hours.

The color of rabbit's urine can vary. It's not unusual for wild rabbits to have very dark, rusty colored urine.

When the eyes are open, continue adding lots of fresh clover, slices of apple, dandelion greens, Queen Anne's Lace, and wheat germ to the floor of the box each day. Include the roots and the soil attached to plants you pick. Grass, because of its low nutritional value, should constitute a small percentage of the total vegetation. Place some formula in a shallow jar cap with active-culture yogurt (with berries) in order to help prevent intestinal bacterial diseases.

Gradually, over a period of several days, eliminate formula feedings as the rabbits start eating on their own. Although rabbits get some moisture from the greens, it is advisable to add a small jar cap of water to the box after weaning. It's not unusual for rabbits to become disinterested in eating when they first open their eyes. Their preoccupation with their new surroundings should subside in about a day, and their appetite should return to normal.

The clover, Queen Anne's Lace, and dandelion greens should be picked twice a day, morning and evening. Be sure the vegetation is free from any toxic sprays. Commercial rabbit chow can be added. Eliminate the formula when you are certain the rabbits are filling up on the natural foods. You may not actually see them eating, but indications that they are include: seeing pieces of grass in the corners of their mouths; noticing the difference between how much natural food put in and how much is left; noticing bites taken from a piece of apple; recognizing that a rabbit's tummy is rounded when no formula has been fed for 4 or more hours; and observing disinterest in formula. If all the greens are consumed, you might not be feeding enough. Provide enough greens so that there is a small amount left between feedings.

Self-feeding rabbits often will stop eating if there is any noise in the room or if they are being observed.

## RELEASING

When the rabbits are eating a natural diet and have been acclimatized, place them in a predator-proof, outside-release cage. Construct the release

cage with wood that hasn't been chemically treated and 1/2-inch hardware cloth. The wire must be fairly small gauge because rabbits can squeeze through very small openings. Wire the cage on all sides, including the top and bottom. Cover the bottom of the cage with soil. Provide the rabbits with natural landscaping in the cage, such as logs, rocks, branches, shrubs, etc. Include a smaller nesting box within the larger cage.

To protect the rabbits from excessive sun, rain, and/or wind, either cover part of the cage with a tarpaulin or construct the cage with a solid top and two adjoining solid sides. Before releasing, the rabbits must have been outside, day and night, rain and shine, for at least 5 days. Provide a large amount of fresh clover, dandelion greens, and Queen Anne's Lace daily. Be sure the water source is fresh and clean.

Rabbits are vulnerable to heat. They should never be placed in the direct sun. If your rabbits develop symptoms of heat stroke (act lethargic, feel hot to the touch, lie in a stretched out position, and are panting), wrap them in a towel that has been moistened with cool (not cold) water. When they have recovered, place them in a cooler location. On extremely hot days, some rehabilitators have placed plastic milk jugs containing water that has been frozen in the rabbit cage to help alleviate the summer heat. When the plastic jug is filled with water, make sure that you don't fill it all the way to the top; the plastic will break when the water freezes if it doesn't have room to expand. If you have trouble with the milk containers cracking, try using a square plastic freezer container.

Release the rabbits in a location where there are plenty of grazing areas plus wooded areas for shelter. Log piles and thick shrubby or thorny thickets are good release areas. Release away from humans, dogs, cats, roads, and gardens. Once a rabbit is released, it probably won't come back to a release site. However, just to be safe, lock the cage door so that the rabbits don't reenter the cage and become an easy, captive prey for predators.

An appropriate release age is 3 to 5 weeks. Do not keep healthy rabbits longer than this. Even though they are not full-grown, they are ready for release and not do well in captivity after 5 weeks.

Check the weather forecast before releasing the rabbits, and wait for a prediction of at least 3 days without rain or dramatic drops in temperature.