

Dealing with sick, injured, and abandoned wildlife

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One of the great things about living in Florida is the abundance of wildlife. But what do you do when you come upon an animal that is sick, injured, or orphaned? Our first instinct is to pick up the animal and take it home to care for it, but this may be worse than leaving it alone. People cannot provide the proper care that is needed because the animal may need around the clock care, species-specific housing, and specialized diet. For example, some baby birds need to be fed every 15 minutes for 14 hours a day with specialized food. In addition, federal and state permits are required to care for wild animals. Although we must resist our instincts when it comes to helping sick, injured, or orphaned animals, there are things you can do to help ensure the animal survives.

The first thing to do is look carefully at the animal. If the animal flies, runs away, or tries to defend itself, it doesn't need any help. Look for signs of illness or injury, such as glazed eyes, irritated eyes, fire ant bites, matted fur or ruffled feathers, visible cuts, and weakness. If the animal appears sick or injured, call the Indian River County Extension Service, Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County, or Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and ask for a referral of a wildlife rehabilitator. These organizations have people who are trained to properly care for sick and injured wildlife and have the necessary federal and state permits.

If the animal appears to be in good condition, it is best to leave the animal alone and check on it in one to two hours. The parents may be close by waiting for you to leave or the animal is able to take care of itself even though it is young. For example, a juvenile armadillo is able to forage with its mother at 21 days old and rabbits are completely weaned at the young age of 15 days.

There may be times when animals become temporarily orphaned due to tree trimming and pruning shrubs. You can help them reunite with their parent by two different ways. One way is to place the animal in its nest (if it is still intact) or one you make and then place it as close to the original nest site as possible. The other way is to leave the animal in a place where the mother can find it. Birds and mammals will not abandon their young if they have been touched by humans. In both cases, you should leave the animal alone and check on it in one hour. If the parents do not return within this amount of time, contact a wildlife rehabilitator to find out what your next step should be.

When dealing with wild animals, it is important to be cautious, resist handling them, and not make them into a pet. Several mammals carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans. If you must handle an animal, use heavy gloves and towels. Although young animals are cute and appear to make good pets, they are wild and can become unmanageable when they become adults.

Although it is difficult to leave a young animal alone that appears to be orphaned, it is the best thing to do. Behavior that is abnormal to you may be part of that animal's normal development. If you do find an animal that is sick, injured, or has definitely been abandoned, get professional help by calling a wildlife rehabilitator before taking any action.

To find a licensed wildlife rehabilitator:

- University of Florida/IFAS Indian River County Extension Service: (772) 770-5030
- Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County: Ilka Daniel at (772) 388-3331
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission: (561) 625-5122

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