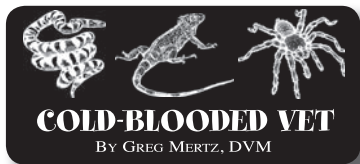


# When Birds and Bees Give Birth



By Greg Mertz, DVM

I had dinner the other evening with a friend who was surprised to learn that wild animals give birth seasonally and not continuously throughout the four seasons. Humans do that, so I guess he assumed all animals must do that, too. Still, even a young man's fancy turns to love in May.

Now's the time most wildlife are caring for their young. Birthing took place back in late March. Hatching takes place a little later in late April or early May. There are exceptions, although here in New England this is by and large a seasonal phenomenon. Pigeons are exceptions; they hatch young all year long, but mostly during the warm months of the year. Great-horned owls hatch their young in late January, but that is because they are trying to get a jump on the season so that their young are in place to eat other 'people's' young as they emerge from the birthing nest. Easy pickin's.

Most baby animals are born with their eyes still closed. This is to keep Mom and Dad from going insane. If you have four babies all at once and they all are screaming for food all at once, and you have to go to the grocery store, the last thing you want are babies who can see where you are going. They will follow you, and then there is always Henry, who has to strike out on his own in the wrong direction. It's a comfort to keep your babies blind as long as possible.

When those eyes finally do come open there is hell to pay. It is a wild and crazy world when you

can see what is around you. Biology has timed these eye-opening events in a general way. You get the muscles and a surge in hunger at about the same time as your eyes come open. This turns most babies into Dora the Explorer. Every May babies all over NE, from the deepest forest to the shallowest back yard, are faced with "Do I stay put until Mom comes back or do I go in search of things on my own?" Natural selection is such a bureaucracy that it inadvertently messes up families and even whole species by either sending babies out on their own and into harm's way, or by keeping babies back where they do not learn well to fend for themselves.

So there you are, in the middle of May, raking your yard, mowing the grass, or weeding the garden when you find one of these blind or newly sighted orphans, squirming on the ground. Sometimes they will screech in high-pitched squeals telling their mothers they are lost. It turns out that wild animal moms are just as maternal as humans, but they are not as well equipped. We lose a baby and there are 911 calls, Amber alerts, police and emergency squads. Squirrels, cottontails, raccoons, opossums, starlings, robins, catbirds and on and on, have four more babies back in the nest, a cat, a dog and a raking human to contend with.

So what do you do? If it is a mammal, clear the yard and vicinity of dogs, cats, children and old people and let their mom do her job. She will decide when it is safe; she may be better sensed and perceptive than you. Give it two or three hours, if she can't retrieve the baby then pick it up with gloves, put it in a soft, dark box with no food or water. You can call the Wildlife Center or another rehabilitator to see if one of us has

the space to care for them.

If it is a bird, try to locate the nest and put the baby back. Birds cannot pick babies up and return them to the nest. If the nest is out of reach, then bringing it to a wildlife rehabilitator is in order. Again, a closed, soft, warm, dark box works best.

As May wears on, babies become adolescents. I don't know if you have ever noticed, but adolescents think they are smarter and more impervious to danger than everyone else. This is true of skateboarders, squirrels, raccoons, robins, and all manner of wild animals. It is normal for baby squirrels to think you are a fun tree and try to run up your leg. This is the squirrel equivalent of a traceur (a Parkour free runner) leaping over staircases and crowds of people. If you don't want this to happen, then don't hang around with traceur squirrels.

It is normal for a songbird to fly or try to fly across the yard and to end up on the ground. Birds don't have thumbs and fingers, so there is no hand holding during this process. Nevertheless, Mom and/or Dad are usually close by, supervising these events.

Mom and Dad Wildlife choose their homes and nurseries where they think birthing, childrearing and family food supplies will be best. Like people and all living creatures and beings, they are opportunistic and will try survival where they can. They do not have the capacity to decipher roadways and what they mean, yard work and how that affects them, and domestic cats with their perverted sense of gift giving. These are all human-made complications, not nature-made challenges.

In any event, the wildlife that have chosen your yard and your neighborhood, have done so with a similar eye to property value and community resources as you. Be honored, they know a good thing when they see it. The complications of wildlife childrearing in your neighborhood is a befuddlement of human activity and the Dept. of Natural Selection.

If you are confronted with problems surrounding babies with eyes closed or with over-eager adolescents, go to our website at [Newwildlife.org](http://Newwildlife.org) for more information under "What to do if you find a baby..." For other info MA Wildlife Rehabilitators.



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