

Baby Season Is Starting... by Cindy Williams

It's that time of year we at Lakeside Nature Center anxiously anticipate with a combination of excitement and dread – Baby Season! This year's first babies showed up at the end of February and, surprising to us, were not squirrels. They were bunnies! It's so strange how a mild winter didn't necessarily mean an early baby season. We start expecting babies around mid-February (the early arrivals anyway) and as of the time I am writing this the babies have just trickled in, and they are almost all bunnies. I'm sure by the time you read this Baby Season will be well under way.



While we are set up to do all we can to help any injured or orphaned animals we take in, we are not the best place for these creatures to be. We are a poor second choice. We tube feed bunnies and opossums, bottle feed raccoons and deer, syringe feed squirrels, poke food down a little bird's throat and do a pretty darn good job but there is no way we can provide just the right nutrition, or anything close to the right education on how to be a wild

<insert animal name here>.

We all want to do what is best for wildlife, so let me start by reminding everyone about the Baby Basics: babies are not necessarily abandoned or injured just because they are helpless. Bunnies in their nest (just a shallow depression in the ground covered by debris) are not necessarily abandoned as their mother usually only does a flyby feeding at dusk and dawn – leave them be if they are in the nest and not injured (or return them to their nest if they are out and their eyes are closed), unless you know the mom is dead. Baby squirrels on the ground don't belong there if their eyes are closed or they are too young, but they can be returned to the nest or to a temporary nest on the same tree and mom will come and get them (yes, she can carry them like a dog or a cat carries their babies). Fawns are often alone nestled on the ground, just where momma put them, and if you leave them be, she will come back and move them - just give her a chance to come back and collect her baby. She places them and goes off to feed somewhere else so that predators don't know where the baby is. If you must move the baby out of a bad situation, please WALK it to a safe place – they have scent glands on the bottom of their feet and mom can find them by following the scent. And if you have raccoons in the attic, please make sure that you don't separate mom from the babies. Choose a humane extractor who will keep them together, or better yet just remove them from the attic and let mom find one of her other nearby nests to move the babies to. It can work!



Baby birds on the ground are ok if they are feathered, it's a normal thing for a fledgling bird to be on the ground for a few days or even a week – don't worry, their parents are nearby feeding and encouraging them. Even hatchlings and nestlings (young birds without feathers) should be returned to the nest if at all possible. Nobody, and I mean nobody, raises wildlife babies as well as their wildlife parents. Please, please call the Center if you have any questions about wildlife you come across. Calls are returned by volunteers even at night, so leave a message and we'll talk you through it. Even as I am writing this article I am checking the phones to return calls.

Oh, and it's a myth that animal mommies will reject their animal babies if a human touches them. Don't mess with them if you can help it, but don't let that stop you from returning them to their mothers.

I often forget how funny it must be for people who aren't used to seeing our setup at the Center to come in and see a bunch of coffee containers lined up on the table ready for the next feeding. So here are some pictures to show you what a baby setup looks like to a wildlife rehabber at Lakeside. Babies come in and are immediately placed in a coffee container with a towel lining the inside. Another towel is placed over the top and held in place with a rubber band with a "cage marker" – a small piece of paper listing species and intake number – stuck in the rubber band (fancy, huh?). That container is then placed in the incubator along with any others. The incubator keeps the babies nice and warm. Every few hours a rehabber (or rehabbers, if we're lucky) warms up formula, gets their paraphernalia in place (tubes, syringes, nipples, etc...) and starts working their way through the coffee containers. It's incredibly time consuming, exacting work.



Inside the coffee can



Lined up for feeding



Snoozing in the incubator

But lest you think April is only about babies, let me show you this poor little gal who came in recently. This pathetic Barn Owl got trapped in a chimney. She spent a week in there before the homeowners were able to figure out that noise they were hearing was more than just mice in the attic. After calling around for help they finally decided to remove the bricks from the chimney to rescue her and bring her to us. Dismantling a chimney - now THAT's dedication to wildlife! She might have some damage to her right shoulder, she definitely has abrasions on her wrists (the outermost bend in her wing is roughly equivalent to our wrist) and she needs some beefing up – turns out being stuck in a chimney for a week is a great weight loss plan. She arrived at the Center the day before this picture was taken and she doesn't feel very good so she's closing her eyes and hunkering down, hoping I will just go away and leave her alone (which I did after I took the picture). Unfortunately we did have to handle her – we got her weight, treated and bandaged her wounds, tube fed her, gave her some painkiller and antibiotics and left her a nice little meal in her cleaned cage to see if we could tempt her. Hopefully after a few weeks of TLC she will be on her merry way and steer clear of chimneys!



Barn Owls are the most widely distributed species of owls (according to Wikipedia) and can be found everywhere except polar and desert regions, Asia north of the Himalayas, most of Indonesia and some Pacific islands. Like most owls they are nocturnal hunters, feeding on mostly small mammals and maybe some birds. Unlike most of our other native owls they don't hoot, their call is more of a screech (not to be confused with the adorable Screech Owl) and they hiss – a LOT! They generally have four babies, and when we have had to raise those babies in the past the din



of them hissing when you walk into the room is amazing. As you can see, they don't look like most of our other Missouri owls (Great Horned, Barred and Screech are the most ubiquitous). In fact, they are in a separate *family* of species than the others (*Tytonidae* vs. *Strigidae* if you're keeping score). The *Tytonidae* are generally referred to as "Common Owls" and the *Strigidae* are generally referred to as "Typical Owls". Confused yet? Me too. Don't worry, just enjoy them all and *viva la difference*.