

## Wild Babies by Cindy Williams

We're in the midst of it now! Lots of babies, lots of feedings, lots of cuteness. We get tons of bunnies, opossums, squirrels and raccoons. Lots of cheeping birds begging for food. The heating pads are warmed up, the coffee containers are in use (we can always use more plastic Folger's coffee containers), batches of babies are being shifted around, added to, and divided as necessary (opossums can show up by the dozen). Cat food is being soaked, formula is being prepared by the gallons, home rehabbers are giving up their time and sleep in a desperate attempt to keep up with the overflow and staff is putting in the hours trying to perform programs, take care of education animals, medicate, feed, bandage, and just generally keep up with the chaos – spring is a busy time for all of us.

But in addition to the dozens of "usual suspects" we also get some relatively unique babies that require a little more thought and effort (and in some cases, pre-exposure rabies shots). Case in point – this adorable Red Fox who came in after someone in the Kansas City found him along the side of the road. It's always hard not knowing the story that goes along with these poor little guys – did mom get hit by a car, did she get scared off and leave him behind, was she hunted, or was there some other reason that he ended up alone and scared? Thank goodness someone had the heart to stop and pick him up and bring him to us. Once he was given an exam to determine if there were any injuries and some flea spray to combat the little critters that hitched a ride, he was set up with some food. He didn't eat right away and had to be tubed with formula.



The first I knew of this little guy at the Center I could hear him crying from down the hall. He was really trying to get someone's attention, but then as soon as you gave him attention he immediately started acting tough. He's a pure cutie. He was sent to a fox specialist home rehabber who will take great care of him and keep him wild enough to be ready for release and hopefully prosper and make lots of little fox babies to help with natural rodent control! Red Foxes are found throughout Missouri but are more common north of the Missouri River. Their numbers have been declining in recent years so we want to make sure this one makes his contribution to our area wildlife.

Every day we have volunteers returning phone calls from the public, trying to assess the seriousness of an issue and give advice on the best course of action. Often with babies, the best course of action is to return a baby to their parents. This is true for most mammals and birds – opossums are about the only exception as mom doesn't typically stick around. I recently talked to a very nice guy from Excelsior Springs who had a Peregrine Falcon down in his yard last year. This month he had a baby owl down in his yard. After we exchanged information (and pictures), I was able to



**Baby on the Ground**  
Photo by Adam Neth



**Mom in tree**  
Photo by Adam Neth

determine that this was the Great Horned Owl equivalent of a fledgling, called a "brancher", and that he looked very healthy and we had every reason to believe mom and dad were still around taking care of them. He even set up a

trail camera to track them, and was able to get some great pictures of mom and dad as well as another sibling up in the tree near the nest. He even captured a short video of the owlet trying to climb straight up the tree trunk (he wasn't exactly successful – there's a reason they call them branchers, they need branches to hop on). This person was kind enough to call for help and receptive enough to accept the solution and interested enough to document the process. It's always great to receive confirmation of our efforts and this had the happiest ending of all – a family intact and ready to carry on the next generation.

On the flip side of that story, we had a Great Horned Owl brancher brought into the Center from Kansas City Animal Control. This owl had wandered into a road and some kind people took him to the Animal Control Officer to make the exchange so our initial information did not have the location of the nest. After some detective work on the part of the staff they were able to track down the probable location of the nest. A staff member took the baby to the site at dusk and was able to confirm the presence of adults and reunite the baby. Even after a week at the Center we were able to reunite this big baby with his parents and send him on his way without having to grow up with humans who can't show him the ways of owls like his parents can. We just don't speak owl! What fantastic stories of two separate Great Horned Owlets getting a second chance in different ways in the same month.

Storms are starting to push babies out of their nests so be aware of the wildlife near you and watch for someone who might need a helping hand – or not! As always, call Lakeside Nature Center if you have a question about what to do with a downed baby or an injured adult. We return calls even in the evenings every day. Let us help you make some more happy endings.

