

Oh, Deer By Cindy Williams

We always talk about the cutest mammal baby. Squirrels get a lot of votes as do Raccoons. Even the Striped Skunk baby can melt your heart. Not too many votes for the baby I rehab at home, the Virginia Opossum, but I would put them in the mix along with the Eastern Cottontail Rabbits. That's usually where the conversation ends. However, who wouldn't fall in love with a baby White-Tailed Deer? They are gorgeous, and their heart-wrenching cry (or bleat) for mama makes you want to cuddle and comfort them (they would not find that comforting, by the way). Those huge eyes!!! But these little Bambis provide a special challenge for the intrepid rehabber who takes them on.



The first rule of thumb when finding a fawn (as with most wildlife babies) is – LEAVE IT ALONE! To understand why, it's important to know their habits and their natural ways. Most deer are born between April and early July. Most of the time they have one or two babies – occasionally they could have three, but that's unusual. A younger (first year) doe is most likely to have only a single baby, while the older does might have twins or triplets.



When a fawn is born, his mother cleans him up and nurses him. A fawn can generally stand and nurse within about half an hour of birth, and can generally walk within a few hours. They usually can't run well enough to avoid trouble until about three weeks of age, so the mother will "instruct" her babies to remain lying in tall grass or other cover for most of the day, still as still can be. Fawns are mostly odorless, so their best defense at this age is anonymity. Their reddish coloring and spots help them blend into their environment. If a mother has multiple fawns she will separate them for the first few weeks. She will only nurse them two or three times a day (more as they grow older), the rest of the time she remains away from them but close enough to come running if there is trouble. This draws a predator's attention away from the babies and to the mother. It works fairly well and explains why the fawn's instinct is to freeze if frightened.

Which brings us to interactions with humans. Most humans' instincts are "if I can catch a wild animal, it must need help". I can certainly understand that belief, it seems logical. But it's often not true, especially in the case of the fawn. They can show up in the weirdest places – I once ran across one in my back yard, at the tree line of the woods just outside my fence. I left it alone and went upstairs to watch out my window. It magically disappeared while I wasn't looking – you see, mom will move them from time to time and she must have come and got him when I was distracted. So what is the right thing to do if you run across a baby deer in the tall grass? First ask yourself a few questions:

- Is it in immediate danger?
- Does it appear to be injured?
- Does it have parasites (large number of flies buzzing, excessive ticks for instance)?
- Do you KNOW that its mother is dead or injured?

If you can't with confidence say "yes" to any of the above then this is not a baby that needs help. Just leave it alone and mom will come along and take care of it, assuming you

give her enough space and don't crowd her out. If the fawn is in danger the appropriate thing to do is NOT to pick him up and carry him to a safer place. Although mostly odorless, fawns do have scent glands in their feet and the right action is to WALK the baby to a safer place so that mom can track his scent and find him.

If the baby is injured, infested, dehydrated or you know mom is dead then the baby needs help. Get him to Lakeside or another qualified rehabber as soon as possible. The most wonderful outcome would be to find another mother and get her to foster the baby – it's tricky but it can be done. Because raising baby deer is complicated. We can't teach them the appropriate deer behavior or feed them the best possible milk. And, because of a disease spreading in the deer population called Chronic Wasting Disease, the Missouri Department of Conservation will not allow us to rehab deer in any county other than his home county. As you might guess, we don't have rehabbers in every nearby county let alone the more distant counties. You also need a fair amount of room – and fencing – to rehab deer. So there aren't a lot of deer rehabbers around.

Earlier in the summer a family member asked me to check on a fawn that a friend of hers brought to the Center. The fawn went to a wonderful rehab volunteer who I see regularly, so it was no problem. He reported that the fawn was doing well and was with another fawn he had. Recently she asked me for an update and I happened to see him at the Center so I asked him about it. He sent me a picture and told me a great story. It seems he had been taking his fawns for a walk in the woods, in preparation for releasing them (I'm telling you, this guy is dedicated as can be). The idea is that eventually they won't follow him home. He told me that during this walk a large doe joined them. She actually interacted with them for several hours! Now he said that he only rehabbed male deer last year so it couldn't have been one of his recent releases. He was actually able to snap a picture of the doe with his two charges. The fawns did follow him home that night but it's amazing to think that these babies might be able to transfer their allegiance from the rehabber to



the doe soon and live a normal, wild life. Because the end goal, as always, is to Let the Wild Be Free.