

# BABY COTTONTAIL RABBITS

*By Sally Joosten*

Perhaps your children discover a nest of baby rabbits in the yard or find a young rabbit sitting by itself.

**Please read the following guidelines to determine when and if help is needed. If after reading this information you determine help is needed, please contact a wildlife rehabilitator near you ([click here for a list](#)). Do not attempt to treat the animal yourself or provide food and water without consulting a licensed wildlife rehabilitator first since this can cause illness or death. The care of a knowledgeable licensed wildlife rehabilitator can help ensure the successful release of the animal back to the wild.**

- **A DISTURBED NEST:**

If you discover a nest through lawn maintenance or other activity, avoid touching the young with your hands. Gently push the babies back into the nest with a piece of cardboard. Cover them with the grass and nest materials that were removed. Place a couple of small twigs in an "x" over the nest and leave the area. Check the nest the following morning. If your "x" has been moved around, the mother has returned and fed them.

If the babies are older and run when the disturbance occurs, leave the area. They will return to the nest on their own.

- **HELP IS NOT NEEDED WHEN:**

Their eyes are open; their ears are up; they are able to hop; and they are not injured.

- **HELP IS NEEDED WHEN:**

Their eyes are closed and they are out of the nest, and you are unable to locate the nest; they are injured; or fly eggs are visible. Broken legs or other clear injuries should receive immediate medical attention.

- **TRANSPORTING INJURED OR ORPHANED COTTONTAILS**

**STRESS IS THE BIGGEST CAUSE OF DEATH IN WILDLIFE!**

Any handling produces stress and can cause death. Do not allow children to handle, hold, pet, or disturb the animal. To avoid stress, put the cottontail in a box with paper towels on the bottom. Keep the box dark and quiet. Notify the licensed wildlife rehabilitator and describe the situation before attempting to bring the animal to the Center.

- **RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP**

The number one reason cottontails are brought to wildlife rehabilitators is injuries by free-roaming pets. The best way to prevent injuries is to keep your cats and dogs confined and leashed.

If you are concerned about a pet capturing a young cottontail, it is better to keep an eye on the pet than to remove the cottontail from the parent.

## COTTONTAIL FACTS

- The gestation period for cottontails is 26-28 days. The number of young per litter varies from 1-9, with the average of 4-5 young. The largest litters are produced in May and June. Babies are 4-5" long at birth, weigh approximately one ounce and appear naked with sparse hair, with eyes and ears closed. Their eyes open at 6-8 days of age. They leave the nest between 13-16 days and occasionally return to the nest. The young are independent of their mother at the age of 15-18 days.
- The food of cottontails is almost entirely plants. They prefer bluegrass, wheat, and red and white clover. In turn, cottontails are a highly preferred food source for many predatory animals.
- Do not assume the young are abandoned or orphaned if you do not see an adult present. Females nurse their young at dawn and dusk, covering them after each visit with grass and fur.

She leaves the nest area because she does not want to attract predators. It is normal for babies to be unattended for long periods of time.

## **COTTONTAILS AS PETS**

Cotton tails are protected by State Law. They are difficult to raise, very easily stressed, and difficult to feed. They often die of shock. They also need others of their own kind with whom to interact.

**\*\*\*REMEMBER, POSSESSION OF WILD ANIMALS, INCLUDING COTTONTAILS, ARE ILLEGAL IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA.\*\*\***

Help cottontails (when they need help) by finding professional assistance for them as soon **as possible**. **If you find an orphaned or injured wild animal call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator ([click here for a list](#)) that is located near you.**

*(Sally Joosten is a founding Board member of The GROW Hospital and Clinical Research Center and has been a professional wildlife rehabilitator and educator, specializing in teaching others who are getting started in the field of wildlife rehabilitation since 1963. She is founder & former Director of McHenry County Conservation District Wildlife Center located in Illinois for twenty years beginning in 1975. She is a founding Board member of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA) and Co-author of "NWRA Principles of Wildlife Rehabilitation, The Essential Guide for Novice and Experienced Rehabilitators" (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Editions). She is founding Board member and current Vice President of the Illinois Wildlife Rehabilitators Association. She has written numerous published papers. She was the recipient of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1998 and the National Registry of Who's Who in 1999.)*