

NATURALLY: Nature's nursery

- By Beth Shoaf Special to the Gazette

It's that time. Baby squirrels are in their dreys. Infant cottontails are tucked under brush piles and bushes. Bald Eagles and Great Horned Owls have already pair-bonded and have eggs or hatchlings in their nests. Canada geese are loudly announcing that they are with their chosen mates and you better stay away. Mourning doves and pigeons are on eggs or young. Baby season 2026 is underway, and there are things you should know to support our wild neighbors in fulfilling their biological imperative of reproduction

Springtime brings us out of our homes after a cold, dark winter. We are anxious to get to work on our yards and gardens. But before you dismantle those brush piles or set them on fire, bring in the landscapers to transform your space, or call the tree guys to trim or remove entire trees, take the time to check those areas for the presence of mothers and their young. So much damage is done to the nest and the babies themselves by folks who would never otherwise harm an animal



Beth Shoaf, pictured with a barn owl, is the founder and executive director of Wildlife Works Inc.

intentionally. In many cases, putting off an outside project for just a few weeks can allow the creatures who have made homes in our yards to raise their young and move on.

Look for squirrels' leaf nests in the trees, or the presence of holes in tree trunks that may hold anything from screech owls to baby raccoons. Carefully check under shrubs, in mulch and leaf piles, in the long grass that has grown up along the edges of your garden. You may find the

shallow depressions made by mother rabbits, lined with fur pulled from her chest, cradling a litter of baby bunnies. Gently poke around in your bushes before trimming in case there are birds' nests tucked inside the branches.

It takes a lot to force a wild parent to desert their offspring. We often hear that the mother bunny or bird hasn't been seen and the nest is "abandoned." In most cases, this is not true. In the case of cottontails, the mother rabbit, or doe, only visits the nest two or three times in a 24-hour period. She sneaks in under cover of darkness to feed her kits, cover them back up and leave the nest area so her presence and smell don't attract predators. There's a simple strategy to ensure that mother is really coming back. If you disturb a rabbit nest while doing yardwork, return any babies that might have popped out to the nest. Re-cover the nest with the dried grasses and fur, and use two pieces of string or small twigs to make an "X" on top of the nest. Keep children and pets away. Check the site the following morning. If the marker has been disturbed, mother returned overnight and all is well. It can take her up to two nights to return. Young cottontails suffer a very high mortality rate once they come into a wildlife rehabilitation setting because they can die from stress and fright. It is *always* best to leave young wildlings in the care of their parents, who can do a much better job than a trained human.

People are often concerned to see young white-tailed deer that appear to be abandoned. Fawns are born covered with spots; they have no scent and they have an instinctual "freeze response" that keeps them very still and in one place. These are survival mechanisms that help keep the fawn safe from predation. Like the rabbit, the white-tail stays away from her baby for long periods of time, and very small fawns may be found in unlikely scenarios, like lying up against a home's foundation. In these situations, the fawns are probably not abandoned and the doe is hiding nearby. The fawn should be left alone unless there are flies or ants on it, there is diarrhea on its rear legs, or it has been crying incessantly for hours, in which case a wildlife rehabilitator should be contacted.

Young birds are often kidnapped by well-intentioned folks who don't understand the natural history of native songbirds. Fledglings are those birds that have left the nest and are being cared for by the parents on the ground. They have most of their feathers, are able to hop and flutter fly — an important step in their development, as they learn the foraging and flight skills needed to survive. Fledgling birds do not need your help, unless they are in danger. They can be gently picked up and moved to safety nearby. Nestling and hatchling birds on the ground can also be picked up and returned to the nest. It is not true that touching young birds will cause abandonment. Most birds have no sense of smell.

These tips can benefit our wild neighbors by leaving their offspring in their natural settings. Your local wildlife rehab can offer many more helpful insights if you find a baby animal. Contact them first before you make a decision to take wildlings away from the care of their parents.

Beth Shoaf is the founder and executive director of Wildlife Works Inc. She is a licensed wildlife rehabilitator of over 30 years and holds permits from the PA Game Commission and US Fish & Wildlife. Wildlife Works is a volunteer-based, nonprofit organization serving Westmoreland County and surrounding areas, dedicated to the rehabilitation and release of distressed wildlife and the promotion of responsible attitudes about the preservation of native species, habitat, and the environment. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.