

Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue, Inc.

The Care of Baby Rabbits and Hares

If you happen across a nest of bunnies do not be too fast to jump to the conclusion that the babies have been abandoned by their mother. Females will spend much of their time away from the nest foraging and return to the nest 2 or 3 times per day to nurse their young. If the babies appear healthy and warm, chances are that the mother has been tending to them and will return. Check the nest in 24 hours before making a decision to intervene. If, after a day, the nest appears to have been abandoned by the female and the youngsters feel cold, appear thin or dehydrated, it is probably time to take the animals to a rehabilitator.

Baby rabbits and hares are notoriously difficult to raise in captivity even by an experienced person. However, there are a few steps that a person can take to help improve the chances of the animal's survival until they can be turned over to a wildlife rehabilitator.

First steps:

The normal body temperature of a rabbit is higher than that of a human so if the babies do not feel warm you should get the temperature back to normal as soon as possible. The temperature may be raised slowly by placing the babies into a small box that has been lined with a soft cloth (sweatshirt material, towelling, etc.) Place the box on a heating pad set to warm. A warm hot-water bottle wrapped in a towel may also be used. At this point the babies should be left alone until they feel warm to the touch.

Once the bunnies have a normal body temperature they must be checked for dehydration. Lightly pinch the skin. If it tents and does not quickly return to its normal appearance, the babies are dehydrated. This must be corrected before an attempt is made to feed the animals. Commercial rehydrating fluids, such as *Gatorade* or *Pedialyte*, may be used. An acceptable solution can also be made by



A baby black-tail jackrabbit.

Dissolving a teaspoon of salt and 3 tablespoons of sugar in a quart of warm water. If the body temperature is normal they should be given hydrating solution every 15 minutes for the first hour. Newborns should only get a few drops each time. Once the skin appears normal and does not tent when pinched, normal feeding may begin.

Housing:

If the eyes are not yet open the babies may be housed in a small box, laundry basket, or other suitable container. Line the container with newspaper and then add soft cloth material – flannel, sweatshirt material, etc. Even baby bunnies can jump quite high to make sure the sides of the box prevent the animal from escaping.

If the eyes are not yet open the animals will require some form of supplemental heat. A heating pad underneath about a third of the box is best. Feel the warmth coming through the bottom of the box. It should feel warm, not hot. A temperature of about 95 degrees F. is best. Once the animals are furred, they will not require the additional heat. Gradually reduce the number of hours the heat is left on. Check the temperature of the bunnies periodically. If it appears to be normal, discontinue the heat.

Place the container in a quiet, draft-free location.

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The animals will like being covered with a piece of soft material until they are weaned and eating on their own.

At this point it is time to call an experienced wildlife rehabilitator. If you are unaware of any in your area, try calling a veterinarian, game warden or zoo for leads. As was mentioned earlier, bunnies are extremely difficult to raise in captivity. However, if the babies appear malnourished and weak, you should begin feeding them until help can be located.

Feeding:

Never try to feed the bunnies cow's milk. They are unable to digest it and it will quickly give them diarrhea and really lower the survival chances of the animals.

Esbilac or *KMR*, both available at most pet shops, are best. However, soy-based infant formulas, such as *Isomil*, *Nursoy*, and *Pro-sobee*, may be used. Mix according to the manufacturer's directions. Use warm water to prepare the formula.

Use an eyedropper, syringe or pet nurser bottle, depending on the size of the rabbits. Nipples can also be purchased at a pet shop that slip over the tip of a syringe or eyedropper.

The amount fed will depend on the age of the baby. After feeding the belly of the animal should be full and round but not tight. Always feed slowly so that the animal does not aspirate the formula into its lungs. This can lead to pneumonia. Rehabilitators recommend feeding baby rabbits every 2 to 3 hours during daylight hours. If the animal is a poor eater, more frequent feedings may be required.

After feeding the animals it is necessary to rub the belly and genital areas with a damp cloth to stimulate the animal to urinate and/or defecate. If the animal does not eliminate within a minute or two, discontinue the rubbing. Usually the animals will begin to eliminate on their own after they are a week old and will not require stimulation.

If the animal becomes bloated it will be necessary to place the lower half of its body in warm water and gently massage its stomach for about 5 minutes. Before returning the baby to the nest box, make sure that it has been thoroughly dried so that it does not become chilled.

Once the animal's eyes are open you may begin to introduce solid foods – fresh clover, dandelion greens, slices of apple, etc. Gradually eliminate formula feedings over a period of days as the youngsters begin eating more and more solid foods. Provide enough greens and solid foods so that there is always a little left over after each feeding.

Although it is very tempting to want to hold and cuddle these tiny animals, keep handling to only what is absolutely necessary so as to minimize stressing them.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Should you encounter an apparently sick or injured adult rabbit in the wild – *do not touch it!* Rabbits can carry a number of nasty diseases – plague, tularemia, etc., which they can transmit directly or indirectly to humans. Call an experienced person, such as an officer from your local animal control or fish and game department. It's not worth the risk.

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