



SO YOU FOUND A...

Baby Rabbit

owl-online.org opwildlife@aol.com

INTRODUCTION

Annually, Operation Wildlife typically takes in 1000-1500 baby cottontails. Most of these are not really orphaned, but were “kidnapped” from their nests by well-meaning people. Cottontails are the most challenging animal for rehabilitators to care for because of their delicate physiologies, and so it is crucial to recognize whether or not a baby is legitimately in need of help before bringing it to OWL.

Cottontails are easily stressed and are notorious for literally dropping dead from fear. With this in mind, baby cottontails should be handled as little as possible.

Cottontails nest in shallow depressions in the ground. Because of the rather conspicuous locations of these nests, dogs and cats frequently discover the babies and destroy the nests. Cottontails are ready to leave the nest when they are about three weeks old (although they continue to nurse). If possible, OWL suggests that concerned pet owners keep their animals indoors or on leashes for just this short amount of time until the babies are out of the nest. If pets won't stay away, one option is to try putting cinder blocks over the nest and place wood planks on top (*see diagrams on page 3*). The mother rabbit will be able to get in to nurse her babies, but pets will be denied access.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

Signs of a true orphan include:

- It is **hairless** and out of the nest
- It is **cold** and **lethargic**
- It is covered with **parasites**
- It is **dehydrated** (pinch a fold of skin off the animal's back; if it snaps back immediately, the baby is fine - if it takes a few seconds, the baby is dehydrated)

If the baby exhibits any of the signs listed above, it should come to Operation Wildlife immediately.

The baby will also need help if it shows any of the following signs of illness or injury:

- It has been in a dog or cat's mouth
- It has a broken limb
- It exhibits abrasions or bruises
- It is gasping or gurgling
- Its head is tilted
- It is bleeding
- Its fur patches or flaps of skin are hanging loosely
- It is unable to stand or move without falling over



cottontail nest

STRING TEST

If you suspect that the baby is an orphan, but it doesn't exhibit any of the sure signs listed above, try putting it back in the nest. Touch all of the babies in the nest gently so they will all smell the same (the idea that the mother will reject the babies if they smell like a human is a myth; what is important is that they all smell alike). If the nesting material has been displaced, it should be rearranged to keep the babies warm until the mother can fill it in.

Place a string (sewing thread or yarn) in a circle around the nest and in an “X” over the top. Leave the nest for 24 hours, then return to check the string. If it has been disturbed, the mother has been to the nest to nurse. Continue to keep pets away for a week or two and mow no closer than 2 feet. If there is no evidence of the mother, call Operation Wildlife for further instructions.

Remember: Mother rabbits only visit their nests very briefly to nurse and then leave as soon as possible to avoid attracting predators (this includes you) to the area. She comes at dawn and at dusk, so you will most likely not see her during the day. She will also not come if you are hovering nearby. Keep your distance or the babies will starve.

Since cottontails are independent at such a young age, many people think that they have found an orphan when, in reality, they have just stumbled upon a beginner who needs to be left alone. If the baby is fuzzy, its ears are erect, it is about the size of a tennis ball, and it has no apparent health issues, this is most likely the case.

Baby cottontails have a significantly higher chance of survival with their mother than with OWL. The mother produces a fatty acid in her milk that combines with enzymes in the baby’s stomach that keep the gut nearly sterile. This action is impossible to reproduce. If baby rabbits are fed commercial milk products they develop enteritis (intestinal inflammation), a condition from which they rarely recover. If you are in doubt about the injured or orphaned status of a baby cottontail, the best decision for the animal’s survival is to leave it alone.

TRANSPORT

The animal should be gently placed in a box lined with a paper or non-terrycloth towel. For tiny hairless orphans, a Zip-Lock baggie filled with warm (NOT HOT) water should be placed in the bottom of the box as a heat source during transport. Place a washcloth or other cloth over the zip lock baggie to prevent burns. Remember: Even baby bunnies can bite! Remember the reaction that rabbits have to stress, and limit your handling to only what is necessary. DO NOT give any food or water.

Note: Cottontails can carry a disease called tularemia that can be transmitted to people. Wash your hands well after handling the cottontail. This is also a good reason to keep children from handling “cute babies”.



juvenile (weaned) cottontail



How to Protect a Cottontail Nest

diagram 1: setup for medium to large dogs

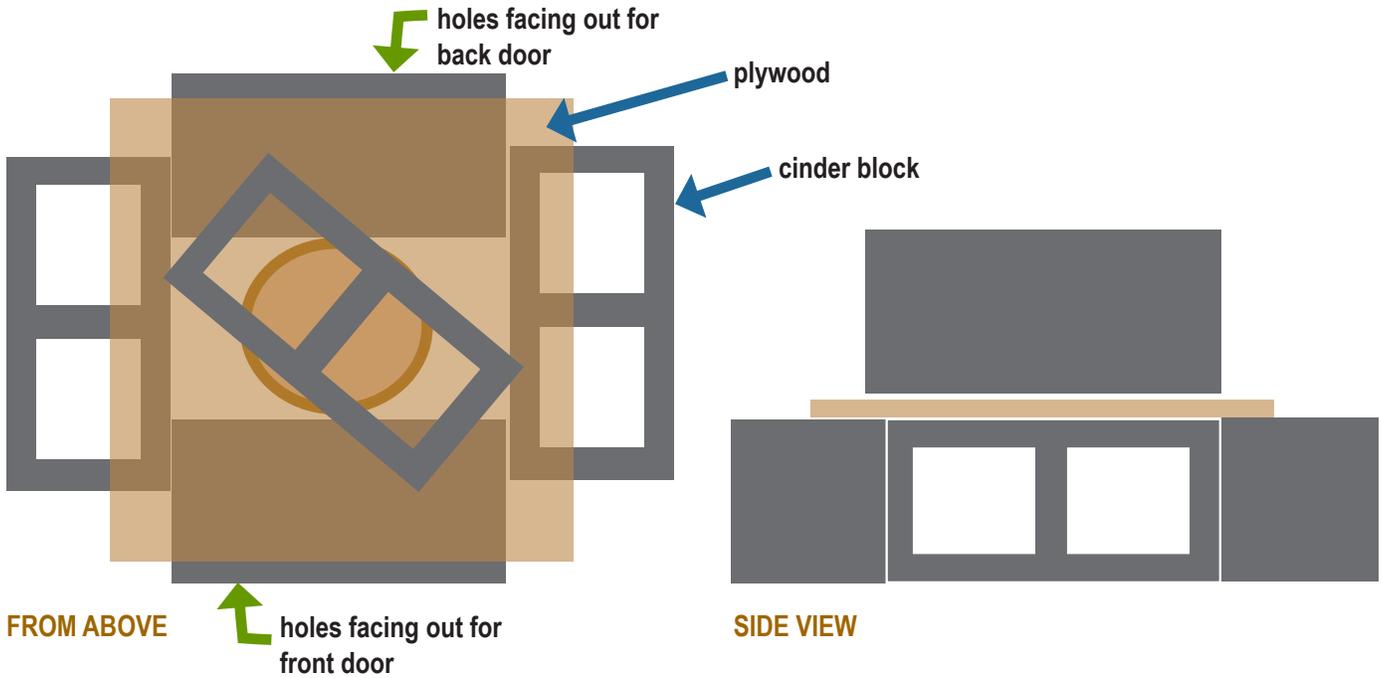


diagram 2: setup for small dogs and cats

