

Babes in the Wood

By KATHY GOFF

Spring, with its milder temperatures and abundant food, is the time when many of our native wildlife species give birth and begin to rear their young. The forests and fields — and sometimes even our back yards — become nurseries for baby animals. It is a special treat to see these little ones, but in most cases the best advice is to leave babies alone and have faith that, just like in the human species, Mother knows best.

Most fawns are born in late May or early June after a gestation period of 200 days. The tiny fawns weigh five to six pounds at birth and are so unsteady on their legs that their mother may lie down to nurse them.

A fawn's tawny-red coat has about 200 white spots for camouflage. Their mother, the doe, beds them down and leaves them alone for their safety, returning several times a day to feed and groom them.

Many fawns are orphaned every spring by well-meaning people who “rescue” them and relocate them to wildlife rehabilitation centers while the doe watches from a distance.

Cottontail rabbits nest in simple “forms” — shallow depressions in the earth lined with their own fur and covered by grass and leaves. Baby bunnies are vulnerable to predators, exposure to harsh weather, and disturbance of the nest by our gardening activities. At three to four weeks old, the bunnies leave the nest to fend for themselves among the hawks and foxes and family pets. This is why female rabbits can have seven litters of two to 10 bunnies each year!



NOTES ON NATURE

The gentle, passive opossum, North America's only marsupial, is our oldest and most primitive mammal, surviving over 50 million years. After mating in February, the mother opossum gives birth to her 1/2 inch-long kits after a gestation period of only 12 days.

The average litter of 16 fits into a tablespoon!

They must crawl into her pouch to attach to a nipple, but with only 13 nipples, not all the young can survive. Those that do grow at an amazing rate, and can be weaned and venture outside at about 75 days.

Their mother might move often to new den sites. A hollow tree, old woodchuck burrow, culvert, or the space underneath your porch all serve as viable locations. On such a move, the babies tend to cling to her back with their claws or tails.



An abandoned woodpecker hole or tree cavity 20 feet to 30 feet above the ground may become home to a flying squirrel family. At about six weeks of age, they are joining their mother for their first short glides. Their diet consists of nuts, tree buds, fruits, berries and mushrooms.

Under the cover of night, they will help themselves to birdseed and suet at our feeders. For example, a family of flying squirrels often visited my studio window feeder for such things; I would put down my paintbrush as I heard the "thump" of their landings and walk over to admire their silky coats and huge dark eyes. They are dainty eaters and don't stay very long before leaping off back into the dark.



I am very fond of skunks, not only for their beauty, but for their easygoing, gentle character. I was fortunate enough to have rescued and lived with a beautiful, playful, and affectionate female skunk for several years. It is no longer legal to raise a skunk, but fortunately there are a few wildlife rehabilitators who will take them.

Five or six "kits" are born in late April or May, their black-and-white pattern already evident. By late June, they begin to follow their mother, single-file on their first feeding excursions outside of the den. They are unable to spray until they grow up a bit, but even the kits will go through the motions of raising their tails and taking aim. The skunk asks only to be allowed to forage on, minding its own business. Enjoy them from a distance.

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