

If You Find a White-Tailed Deer Fawn



photo by Fred LaBounty

If you find a fawn, before attempting to rescue it there are some things that you need to be aware of.

Laws: It is illegal to bring deer into Virginia from another of state. If you find a deer in a neighboring state that needs assistance you must find that help within that state. This is to protect the deer population in Virginia. The goal is to prevent disease from being transferred from one herd to another and potentially infecting otherwise healthy herds of deer. Currently, there is a great deal of concern in Virginia regarding the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease. Chronic Wasting disease is a contagious neurological disease affecting deer. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) is increasing surveillance in certain areas of the state to monitor for the disease.

Adult Deer: Adult white-tailed deer are very powerful animals. An injured adult deer can cause severe injury to itself and/or to a person trying to rescuing it. For this reason, the appropriate authorities should be contacted if you find an injured adult deer. VDGIF regulates the deer herds in Virginia. If you find an adult deer that is sick or injured you should call your local game warden or Sheriff's department for help. For logistical and safety reasons the Wildlife Center of Virginia does not rehabilitate adult deer. The risk of injury to the animal and to our staff is too great, and experience has shown us that even if an adult deer is taken into captivity for care, the extreme stress of captivity usually leads to additional injuries and/or a condition called capture myopathy, which frequently leads to death. In almost all cases, the most humane response to severe injuries in adult deer is to euthanize the animal as quickly as possible, at the site of the accident

Fawns: Wildlife Center of Virginia does accept, treat and rehabilitate young fawns, generally those less than 6 months of age. The following are guidelines can be used to determine if it safe to assist a fawn. Fawns that can be safely assisted

- have spots
- are not afraid of humans
- do not run when approached
- are the size of or smaller than a medium sized dog
- are found during the late spring/summer months

If the fawn is starting to lose its spots, shows fear of people, tries to run away, is slightly larger than a medium sized dog and is found in fall, the deer should be dealt with by the game department (you may call the Wildlife Center of Virginia for contact information) or local police agency. A fawn that runs away from humans should not be chased as this may cause further injury to the fawn and may lead to a condition called "capture myopathy". Fawns can and do die from capture myopathy.

Assisting a fawn

Step #1: Prevention

The best fawn rehabilitation is prevention. Educate yourself regarding the natural history of deer. If you find a fawn by itself during the day it does not necessarily mean it is an orphan!

Deer mate in the fall and have their young between April and July, with most births occurring in June. Deer usually have one fawn per season, but can have twins or triplets. The mother will generally leave the fawn alone all day and only come back to feed it at dawn and dusk to avoid attracting predators. Fawns have no odor and are very well camouflaged. The mother does have a scent so she will tap her baby on the back or top of the head to tell it to "stay put" while she is away. Fawns stay with their mother for about one year.

Step #2: Assessing the Situation

If the fawn is uninjured and alone then it should not be removed from the area. The mother will come back at dusk to feed it. (Do not wait near the fawn to see if the mother will return. If humans are around the mother may not want to approach the fawn). If you are concerned that the mother is not feeding the baby you may go back the next day to check on the fawn is still there. If it is not there then it is likely that the mother has retrieved the fawn and they have moved on. If the fawn is still there then you should check for dehydration by gently pinching the skin on its back. If the skin snaps back to its original position within 1-2 seconds then the fawn is fine and should left alone. If the skin stays in the tented position and the fawn seems lethargic then it is possible that the mother has not returned to feed it. An attempt should be made to see if the mother has been hit by a car or is incapacitated near by.

If the fawn is injured, severely dehydrated, has fly eggs on it, or if you know for sure that the mother has been killed, you should contact a local wildlife organization or rehabilitator. You may call the Wildlife Center of Virginia at 540-942-9453 and we can help you locate a resource near you.

Step #3: Solving the Problem

If you have picked up a healthy fawn that was found alone and mistaken for an orphan, it is best to try to return it to the same spot where you found it within up to 72 hours. The mother can do the best job of raising her fawn. The mother will continue to look for her baby up to 72 hours, after that time her

milk will start to dry up. The fawn should be placed back in the area it was found and then gently tapped on the back or the top of the head, like the mother would do, to encourage it to lie down and stay until its mother arrives.

What if a fawn is found in a dangerous place?

If the mother deer (doe) did not make a good choice as to where she left her fawn (such as close to a road or near some other potential danger) the fawn may be picked up and moved a short distance away from the danger (generally less than 50 yards), but try to keep the fawn within eyesight of the original location. If you are concerned about the fawn, you may check on it the following day.

You should NEVER attempt to raise a baby deer on your own, and especially avoid feeding cow's milk to fawns. Despite your best efforts, most deer hand-raised by private citizens will die or need to be euthanized. Please give healthy fawns the best possible chance for survival and leave them in the wild where they belong! If you find an injured fawn it should be taken to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. Raising a wild mammal in captivity is illegal unless you have a rehabilitation permit issued by the state. For information on how you can become a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, contact the Wildlife Center of Virginia or VDGIF.

Reasons why the public should not attempt to raise fawns

- 1) Fawns have the best chance of survival when left with their mother. The mother's milk is essential to their survival. This milk is extremely difficult to mimic in captivity, deer have very sensitive stomachs and may not be able to digest other type of formulas.
- 2) Fawns are very easily tamed and easily become imprinted on people. Tame fawns CANNOT be released back into the wild. They do not have the appropriate fear of humans and domestic dogs. Without that fear they are more likely to be attacked by a dog or to be shot during hunting season. Wildlife rehabilitators take many precautions to ensure that fawns do not become tame.
- 3) Fawns grow up to be powerful adults weighing 100 - 225 lbs. Especially during the breeding season, (known as the "rut"), sexually mature, adult deer that have no fear of humans can be very dangerous. Rutting deer, especially males, can be very aggressive and may seriously injure or even kill the humans, including the people who raised them. This has happened.

NOTE: Raising any wild mammal in captivity is generally illegal unless you have a permit issued by the state. For information on how you can become a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, contact the Wildlife Center of Virginia or VDGIF.

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