



## Wild Animal Encounters and Frequently Asked Questions

Over the years, Ijams Nature Center has fielded many calls about what to do when encountering a wild animal. The following frequently asked questions (FAQs) provide typical answers to the most common questions Ijams has received.

### **1. I found an injured animal or one that is acting strangely. What should I do?**

Wild animals are capable of inflicting serious injuries, especially when they are hurt or cornered. Many helpful people have ended up in the hospital from injuries caused by a heron's beak, an owl's talon, or a mammal's teeth and claws. Additionally, wild animals may transmit diseases or parasites to a well-meaning rescuer. The raccoon strain of rabies is now widespread throughout East Tennessee and the region is a federally mandated testing zone. All adults of the following species—bats, skunks, raccoons, foxes and coyotes—that come in contact with humans or that are trapped for any reason must be euthanized and tested. While it is highly unlikely for opossums to carry rabies, you still should leave them alone.

**Because of health and safety reasons, Ijams does not recommend handling any wild animal. Call the following agencies for assistance:**

#### **Sightings of injured wildlife (along rural road, or along the river bank)**

- Knoxville City Animal Control Unit +1865-215-8639
- Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency +1800-332-0900 or +1423-587-7037

#### **Sightings of injured birds of prey (owls, eagles, hawks, falcons)**

- Smoky Mountain Raptor Center +1865-680-9623
- American Eagle Foundation +1865-429-0157

#### **Sightings of injured wildlife in an urban area or in your yard**

- Knoxville City Animal Control Unit +1865-215-8639
- Knox County Animal Control (outside Knoxville and Farragut city limits)  
+1865-215-2444

If an animal is already in your possession by the time you read this, call Animal Control to arrange transportation to the University of Tennessee Veterinary Teaching Hospital. Do not let anyone handle the animal, and keep children and pets away from the animal.

If it is a very small animal and you already have it in a box, call the **Veterinary Teaching Hospital** for advice at **+1865-974-8387**. They will accept some wild animals into their wildlife care program; however, **you must call first**.

If you have had contact with a bat, raccoon, skunk, coyote or fox, call the **Knox County Health Department** at **+1865-215-5110** and animal control for the area in which you live.

## 2. I found an orphaned baby animal. What should I do?

**Due to health and safety concerns, Ijams Nature Center does not recommend handling any wild animal.** If you find a baby wild animal, it is best to leave it alone. Many mammals, such as deer and rabbits, leave their young unattended for extensive periods of time. Only state-certified wildlife rehabilitators are legally allowed to possess native wildlife species including mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles. Improper care of wild animals by well meaning, untrained individuals yields either imprinted wild animals (animals that cannot be released back into the wild) or animals that have nutritional issues resulting in lifelong health issues. Inexperienced caregivers also risk serious health problems due to disease and parasite transmission from wild animals.

Each situation is different. The following information may help you. If not, please call **Ijams Nature Center** at +1865-577-4717 regarding your specific concern.

### Baby Songbirds

**Nest Has Fallen:** Place the nest in a wicker basket or a small plastic strawberry container (make sure there are drainage holes) and tie it to the nearest tree trunk or branch. Using gloves (as not to leave your scent to attract predators) place the young in the container. Keep children and pets away and observe for two hours for the return of the parent. If you see no activity, contact one of the state-certified wildlife rehabilitators.

**Fledgling (Feathered but Cannot Fly):** It takes two to three days for most baby birds to learn to fly once they leave the nest. Keep children and pets away. Do not “run down” and catch the baby. If it is chirping, it is communicating with the parent. If it is in danger, for example next to a road, move it with gloved hands to a low branch or a bush. Observe that it is able to jump and/or perch. Leave it alone.

**Truly an Orphan (Rare):** If your dog brings a baby home or your cat kills both parents, call one of the state-certified wildlife rehabilitators. Do not feed the baby. Do not give milk or water.

### Baby Mammals

Most “babies” that are seen are probably have already left their parents and are on their own. Baby rabbits are on their own by the time they are 3.5 inches in length. Squirrels that have a body length of 5 to 6 inches, and opossums that have a body length of 7 inches are ready to be on their own. If you encounter smaller babies, or babies of other mammal species, in your yard and you are sure the parent is dead, call **Animal Control** in the **City of Knoxville** at **+1865-215-8639** or in **Knox County** at **+865-215-2444**.

### Baby Turtles

Leave turtles alone. If applicable, move a turtle off of the road in the direction in which it is traveling.

### **3. I have an animal in my attic, crawl space, basement, etc. What should I do?**

If you have a wild animal in your home or some similar emergency situation, Ijams recommends that you hire a wildlife management service, such as **Varmint Busters** at **+1865-675-5677** or **Predator and Prey Wildlife** at **+1865-724-4569**. These services trap and relocate wildlife, and will help you formulate a plan to prevent the re-entry of wildlife into your home.

### **4. I found an animal. Can I keep it?**

No. Please leave it where you found it. It is against state law to remove any animal (mammal, bird, fish, amphibian, or reptile) from its native habitat. If you enjoy seeing wildlife on your property on a regular basis, there are many simple things you can do to make your property wildlife friendly.

### **5. I purchased a turtle and I don't want it anymore. What should I do?**

In Tennessee, it is legal to own a pet turtle, but they cannot be released into the wild. A majority of turtles sold in other states are red-eared sliders, a species NOT native to East Tennessee. Because they are a non-native species, and have diseases and parasite issues, they cannot be released into the wild. For more information, call **Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA)** at **+1800-332-0900**. Also, please encourage friends and colleagues not to purchase these turtles when traveling.

### **6. I found eggs buried in my garden/compost bin. What should I do?**

If at all possible, leave them alone; they are likely reptile eggs. In your garden, especially if the soil is slightly sandy, they are most likely turtle eggs. Unless you live near water, they are probably box turtle eggs. One of the box turtle's favorite foods is garden insects.

Eggs found in your compost bin are most likely nonvenomous snake eggs. All the native venomous snakes in East Tennessee bear live young and do not lay eggs. Nonvenomous snakes such as black racers, black rat snakes and corn snakes will lay their eggs in compost. If you are a gardener, these are exactly the snakes you want to have around. Their favorite foods are mice, rats, chipmunks, baby squirrels and rabbits. Snakes are nature's best control of these animals. Eggs typically hatch in August or by the second week of September at the latest.

### **7. I've been bitten, scratched or injured by a wild animal. What should I do?**

Clean the injury well with soap and warm water, administer first aid and contact your personal physician for further advice.

**Mammals:** If the injury was caused by a mammal, contact your local health department (**Knox County** at **+1865-215-5000**) and seek advice on how to proceed. If you have the mammal in your care, or you have a good idea where it is, contact your local Animal Control (**City of Knoxville** at **+1865-215-8639** or **Knox County** at **+1865-215-2444**) to have it picked up and tested for rabies.

**Venomous Snakes:** If you have been bitten by a venomous snake, do NOT try to cut the wound or suck out venom. This can lead to further injury and possible spreading of the venom. Contact your local health department (**Knox County at +1865-215-5000**) and seek treatment immediately.

**Spiders:** If applicable, tell your physician that you think you may have been bitten by a spider.

## **8. I have accidentally killed or found a dead wild animal. What should I do?**

It is best to let nature's scavengers and decomposers do their jobs. If it is a small body and you need to, you can bury it, but use caution; wear gloves and use a shovel to handle the animal. If you have hit a large animal with your car, there are county road crews who will pick it up. With other animals you need to contact **TWRA at +1800-332-0900** for specific information. **Please note: It is illegal to keep any nongame bird parts, including feathers.**

If the animal is wearing a band, tag or tattoo, please call **TWRA at +1800-332-0900** and give them the number, where you found the animal, and if known, where, when and how it died. A bird band can be removed from the bird and mailed to Bird Banding Laboratory, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Laurel, MD 20708 along with where and when the bird was found.

## **9. I found a turtle crossing the road. What should I do?**

During the spring and summer months, turtle activity increases as they move through their home ranges searching for mates and places to dig nests and lay eggs. This often has them crossing roads to move from one spot to another. If it is safe for you to do so, pull off to the shoulder of the road, turn on your hazard lights, wait for traffic to die down, and gently help move the turtle in the **same direction it is traveling**, directly across the road. Do not make the turtle change course; it has a particular place it is trying to go and will try to cross the road again if put back on the side from which it is traveling.

**NOTE: If you must handle the turtle to help it cross, ALWAYS use two hands.**

**Box Turtles:** These turtles have a high-domed shell and live primarily on land, so placing them into the water will not help them. They can be easily picked up by two hands, just as you would hold a cheeseburger. You can also place one hand on their belly and the other on the top of their shell to support them.

**Pond Turtles and Sliders:** These tend to be larger than box turtles and can have a nasty bite. They also often have long claws that can scratch. If you must pick up and move one, you can either place one hand on either side of its shell just between the front and hind limb to carry it (like holding a cheeseburger), or slide one hand under its belly from behind and supporting the top of its shell with your other hand.

**Snapping turtles:** These turtles have a very powerful bite as well as long, sharp claws. They will not act as calm as box turtles, so moving them should be done with extreme care. NEVER use a snapping turtle's tail to pick it up because this can damage its ribs and backbone (which is fused on the top of its shell). You can use a tree branch or other sturdy object to push the turtle along. If you must

handle the turtle to move it, always do everything from behind, avoiding the mouth. Sliding a hand under its belly from behind and using your other hand to help lift and support the turtle can help you coax it across the road. Be careful of their sharp claws and powerful feet!

**Note:** Although pond turtles and snapping turtles are often found in the water, it is not strange to see them on dry land. They often cross from wetland to wetland using dry land and do all of their nest digging and egg laying out of the water.

**10. I want to relocate wild animals that are on my property. Can I release them at Ijams?**

No. Do not release any animal—wild or domestic—on the Ijams Nature Center grounds. Animals that are vectors for rabies can cause the disease to spread among healthy populations. Nonnative animals such as goldfish disrupt delicate ecosystems and cause harm to native species. If it wasn't born here or did not come to Ijams on its own, it does not belong here.

## **Additional Resources**

**List of Certified Wildlife Rehabilitators:** <https://www.tn.gov/twra/wildlife/rehab.html>

### **Wildlife Damage Control**

- Predator and Prey Wildlife +1865-724-4569
- Varmint Busters +1865-675-5677