



For Immediate Release: June 6, 2017

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Keep Wildlife in the Wild

BURLINGTON – Baby animals are irresistibly cute and cuddly, but Vermont Health and Wildlife officials want you to leave young wild animals in the wild.

Vermont’s head game warden, Col. Jason Batchelder, says this is the time of year when wardens get calls from people who find little animals they believe are abandoned or orphaned, and take the animals home to care for them. Batchelder says that’s bad for the animals, and potentially for people too.

Dr. Robert Johnson, Vermont’s public health veterinarian agrees. “It’s tempting to think an animal may need rescuing – especially a baby, but wild animals are not pets and may pose a health risk,” said Johnson. “Once people take in a wild animal and are bitten or exposed to its saliva, it needs to be tested for rabies, and this means killing the animal.”

“It’s perfectly normal for young wildlife to be on their own.” said Batchelder. “The best thing people can do if they are concerned is to avoid handling any wild animal, and instead contact their local game warden. An animal’s best chance of survival is to remain in the wild.”

Rabies is a viral disease of the brain that infects mammals, and is most often seen among wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats. Cats, dogs and livestock can also get rabies if

they have not been vaccinated. Rabies is a fatal disease for both humans and animals. Health officials report that 15 animals have tested positive for rabies in Vermont so far this year.

In 2013, a baby skunk that was thought to be abandoned and was rescued from the side of a road later tested positive for rabies. Everyone exposed to the animal's saliva, including six children, underwent preventative vaccinations.

Wildlife officials have already responded to similar situations this year. A family with two children had been caring for two young racoons they found, including bottle feeding them. Game wardens retrieved the animals and brought them to a lab for testing to ensure the family was not exposed to rabies.

Rabid animals often show a change in their normal behavior, but you cannot tell whether an animal has rabies simply by looking at it.

Col. Batchelder said people should not approach an animal that is acting strangely or is showing symptoms of rabies. "Our wardens are specially trained to deal with potential rabies cases. We ask people to contact us immediately if they believe an animal is rabid, and not attempt to handle it themselves. Handling a rabies-vector species could put you and your family at risk of a potentially deadly disease."

"The best thing for wild animals is to enjoy them from a distance," said Batchelder.

If you suspect an animal may have rabies, call the Rabies Hotline 1-800-472-2437 (1-800-4-RABIES).

For more information about rabies in Vermont, visit healthvermont.gov/rabies

If you find an animal that appears orphaned, injured or abandoned, learn what you can do at http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/learn_more/living_with_wildlife/injured_and_orphaned_wildlife

You can see how to enjoy viewing wildlife in Vermont, including what's on the move right now. Go to "Watch Wildlife" at vtfishandwildlife.com

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