

COLUMNISTS

Save our squirrels; here's how to give orphaned animals a chance

Julie Solano Special to the Reporter-News

Published 5:00 p.m. CT May 1, 2022

This column is for educational purposes because wildlife does not have a voice. We as animal advocates are their voice. Speak up!

In Texas, you can find eight different species of squirrels, including ground, tree and flying squirrels. This spring, the Big Country Wildlife Rehabilitation Center received a sickly Mexican ground squirrel.

The little squirrel suffered from metabolic bone disease (MBD), which occurs because of a deficiency of calcium in the squirrel's diet. Even with the best of intentions, it is better to contact a wildlife rehabilitation center, rather than attempt to take in an animal to raise it yourself. It is difficult to provide the appropriate nutrition a squirrel needs.

MDB is caused by improper diet while the squirrel is in captivity. Often MDB results from a squirrel not getting the right combination of different nuts and nutrients — particularly not enough calcium.

Just like in humans, a squirrel needs vitamin D to be able to soak up calcium. Natural sunlight helps a squirrel's body to produce Vitamin D. More than building strong bones, calcium is critical in cellular communication and organ health.

MBD can cause painful joint swelling, paralysis and reduced activity. Early signs of MBD can be mistaken for another illness and if treatment isn't started quickly, permanent damage or loss of life can occur.

Thankfully, with awareness we can avoid an animal developing MBD. Squirrels are not pets.

If an orphan squirrel is found, contact a wildlife rehabilitation center right away. If the baby cannot be reunited with mom, bring it inside and place it in a warm blanket in a quiet location. Do not feed the squirrel and bring it to a rescue as soon as the animal is accepted.

We were told the baby Mexican ground squirrel was 4 months old. In its malnourished state, it did not look like it was over 6 weeks old. Unfortunately, because of the squirrel's severe case of MBD, it did not survive.

This is the hard part of rehabilitation. Please, if you find an orphan, do not provide "DIY" care. Call a licensed rehabilitation and transfer to a rescue immediately. Do not feed the animal. Just keep it warm and get to a rescue. That's it! It's that simple!

This will give the animal the best chance of survival, rehabilitation, and release back into the wild, where they belong as nature intended. Wildlife are not DIY projects.

Reach out to Big Country Wildlife Rehabilitation Center on their website bigcountrywildliferescue.org, via Facebook @BigCountryWildlifeRescue or by phone at 325-280-1328. They are located at: 9181 US Highway 277 South in Hawley.

Upcoming Big Country Texas Master Naturalist Events:

- ▶ April 29 to May 1: City Nature Challenge. Check Big Country Master Naturalist Facebook for more information.
- ▶ May 7: Lake Hike, Abilene State Park. Pay at park entrance, then be at Lake Abilene parking area by 9 a.m. Bring water and appropriate footwear for five-mile hike.
- ▶ May 21: Cedar Creek Waterway Hike. Meet at trailhead off of East South 11th Street at 9 a.m.

Julie Solano is a member of the Big Country Texas Master Naturalists.