

Reuniting Raccoon Families

Jamie Ray, Director of San Francisco's wildlife rehabilitation and humane wildlife problem resolution programs (SF ROMP) has spent the past 10 years pioneering programs that focus on preventing dependent wild mammals from coming into rehabilitation centers. Through a combination of skilled hotline and on-site services, she's been able to reduce orphaned wildlife intakes and provide a non-lethal help to people experiencing wildlife behaviors that bother them.

Following are some tips she's shared on reuniting mother and baby raccoons.

Baby raccoons come into wildlife rehabilitation centers because they are sick, injured or orphaned. But not all healthy underage animals are legitimately orphaned. Sometimes they have just been "temporarily separated" from their mother and can be reunited with her.

Each situation has to be judged individually, but with information from the finder and a medical evaluation for dehydration and emaciation, we can make a pretty good guess as to whether reuniting is an option.

Reuniting is a win for the raccoons and rehabilitators. Putting a bit of effort into reuniting mothers and babies can save us time and money raising young raccoons and give these animals the chance to not only be with their mother, but eventually learn how to safely cross streets, find food and water, and establish themselves in the complex and territorial raccoon social structure, things we can't teach them.

Reuniting raccoon mothers and young usually requires us to provide information to the people that live or work at the location of separation to enlist their help. Most people will help with the effort when they learn that the mother will relocate her young to another location. Some people even re-open a den entry they sealed when they realize that the mother and babies will leave when the young are able to climb.

Common causes of young raccoons being separated from their mothers:

- 1) Mother trapped, babies removed from the natal den
- 2) Mother locked out of the natal den, babies removed.
- 3) Baby fallen into a wall or other tight area inside a structure
- 4) Young juvenile getting leg stuck in fence or tree.

Natural History/Baby Raccoons

Because raccoons don't make a nest like a bird, they can't have their young in trees where they normally sleep in the daytime. In urban areas where hollow trees and other natural den sites are scarce, mother raccoons will use crawl spaces in buildings, sheds, or enclosed hot tub spaces to keep their vulnerable young safe from people and dogs. Unfortunately, people often detect these den sites. The most common response is for people to want the animal that's "moved in" to be immediately removed. Most people are unaware that there are babies present, and that they will leave of their own accord once the babies are mobile and able to climb. Mother raccoons almost always return to the separation site for one or more nights to look for their young.

When is reuniting mothers and baby raccoons is a viable option?

Mother trapped and babies removed from den

If the mother was killed or relocated more than 10 miles away, reuniting isn't a viable option. If she was trapped and released in her own territory after the opening was closed, reuniting is an option for approximately three days after the mother was locked out.

Mother locked out of natal den, babies removed from den

Mother raccoons often sleep separately from their young during weaning, and can get locked out if the opening is closed in the daytime. Sometimes people seal the opening when they see her leave at night, not realizing that there are young animals inside. In either of these scenarios, reuniting the mother and young are possible if not too much time has passed. Finder information and extent of the babies' dehydration will be your guides. Mothers have been known to rip holes through wood to get their young. If scratching sounds are still being heard, she's still around! Two to three days from separation is the window of opportunity.

Baby fallen into wall cavity or other tight space

If a baby fell into a wall cavity (between studs where the mother can't reach the baby), then reuniting will be very easy. (Note: severely dehydrated young need medical care.) Simply place the baby near the opening to the den area. I've had a mother snatch the baby from my gloved hand when doing this. Explaining to people that one baby more or less will make no difference in the situation of the den being there usually makes this type of reuniting easy.

Baby raccoon with leg stuck in fence or tree

If the leg isn't broken (the baby can bear some weight on the leg) I always get the baby back to the location as soon as possible. Often the mother is in a tree or on a roof nearby when I return with the baby. If there is a lot of swelling, I give a dose of anti-inflammatory. If there is an abrasion, I give a shot of a penicillin G or other "48 hour" dose antibiotic. Convenia is a time released 7-day dose antibiotic.

Reuniting

Reuniting is most likely to be successful at night, although a mother that was just chased from a den area may check on her young in the daytime after she senses the danger has passed.

I recommend placing the young raccoon/s in something they can't crawl out of, but the mother can easily tip over to get them out. I use a 13-gallon (kitchen size) garbage can for infants and a 30-gallon garbage can (preferably with side handles) for juveniles. I tip the 30-gallon can slightly with a piece of wood under one side to facilitate her tipping it. I don't like to assume a successful reunion just because a baby isn't in a kennel in the morning if the kennel door has been left unlatched. Young animals that can crawl will usually crawl off in search of the mother.

I place the can as near as possible to the last location mother and baby were together, and near a fence or structure if possible, so she can look down and see them. I don't rely on the baby to constantly cry to alert her to its presence.

To help the mother find the young, I rub the baby with a towel or two to get its smell on the towel and leave one towel draped over the lip of (or next to) the container the baby in. I put another "baby scented" towel on a fence or in another area the mother would likely cross if she's in the vicinity. If people are likely to disturb the can overnight in the location where the animals were separated, (i.e., baby's leg caught in fence) I use baby-scented towels as a "Hansel and Gretel" trail to lead the mother to the container.

Be sure that young animals are kept warm overnight. A snuggle safe or heating pad with extension cord to keep small raccoons warm. It may take a couple of nights for her to collect all of them. If some are taken, give her another night to return for the others. Babies that need bottle-feeding should be returned to the center for feeding in the morning, if a second night of reuniting attempt is going to be made.