



Baby Eastern Cottontail Rabbits

Welcome to the world!

Eastern cottontail rabbit babies are called kits. Mother rabbits can have three to eight kits in a litter, and have three to four litters a year. In Wisconsin, kits may be born anytime from the beginning of March through October.

There's nothing better than the care of a mother!

To avoid attracting attention to her kits, the mother cottontail is only at the nest long enough to nurse at dawn and dusk. Other than the short time needed for nursing, the mother will leave kits alone for the remainder of the day and night. If there are people or pets in the area, the mother will delay the feeding until it is quiet. You should not expect to see the mother visit her nest for feeding.

Healthy kits should be returned to their nest!

Unhealthy kits with wounds, large numbers of fleas or ticks, fly eggs (which look like tiny, white grains of rice), or live maggots, or kits that are cold, limp or unresponsive should not be returned to their nest. If your pet has injured one or more kits, those injured kits need to be seen by a wildlife rehabilitator, but any remaining uninjured kits can be returned to the nest if there are 2 or more remaining. A single uninjured kit should be brought in for rehabilitation, since they are unable to keep themselves warm in the nest alone. If you're not sure if the kits are healthy, contact Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center at 608-287-3235, or call your local wildlife rehabilitator. Snapping a quick photo of them with your cell phone is a helpful way to help us assess the kit's condition.

The babies grow up so fast!

Mother rabbits will nurse the kits in the nest for only three to four weeks. The young will start venturing out of their nest to nibble on greens as they grow, but return to the nest at night. By about four to five weeks of age, even though they still look quite small, young rabbits are independent and ready to be on their own.

In order to reunite a healthy kit, first you must locate the nest!

Cottontail mothers generally make their nest in a shallow depression in the ground. The nest could be anywhere including the middle of the yard, along a building wall, under a bush, on a playground, in a garden or anywhere that the mother can dig in the dirt. The mother will generally top off her nest with some of her own fur, along with other vegetation such as dried grasses. Once the nest is found, it is important to know you may not relocate the nest to a place you think would be better or safer. A mother will not find her kits if you move the nest.



These kits are about 2-3 days old.



This rabbit is old enough to be independent.



*Example of a cottontail nest.
Note the rabbit fur on top of the nest.*

A few important things to know before reuniting.

- **Please do not offer any food or water to the kits** – doing so can have deadly consequences.
- The kits see you as a predator – do not play with or excessively handle them.
- A kit's best chance for survival is with the care of its mother. Reuniting is the right thing to do!

Steps to reuniting baby rabbits:

1. Place the kits back into the *original nest* snuggled close together.
2. Cover the babies with any original nesting material and fur that remains. If no original nest material remains, collect some dried grass or other plant materials to lightly cover the rabbits.
3. Use long blades of grass to make a checkerboard grid over the top of the nest. Try to place the blades of grass no further that 2" apart. Be sure the pattern is clearly recognizable by you. Take a photo of the grid to use to compare to the following morning.
4. Leave the area, and keep pets and kids away from the nest location. Do not check on the nest until the following morning.
5. The following morning after dawn, check the nest again. Avoid checking the babies prior to this time because your presence will keep mom away. Is the pattern you made with grasses is changed? Consult the photo you took of the nest if needed to compare. If the grass pattern is disturbed, you can feel confident that the mother returned to feed the babies.
6. If you have doubts about whether the kits have been fed, with glove on, you can pick up a kit to check its belly. A baby that has been recently fed will have a full, round belly. They will also feel nice and warm. If the kit doesn't have a lot of fur, you'll even be able to see the white from their mom's milk showing through their skin. If you are still unsure, you may send us a picture of the kit's belly. Pictures can be sent to wildlife@giveshelter.org. Please make sure to include your name and when you originally called us about the nest.
7. If the grass pattern was clearly not disturbed, the kits may be truly orphaned and need to be taken to a wildlife rehabilitator. Call Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center at 608-287-3235, or your local wildlife rehabilitator for further advice.



Mark the nest with blades of grass 1-2" apart in a checkerboard pattern. Snap a photo of your pattern to compare to the next morning.



These are examples of healthy kits with round full bellies.

I'm afraid my dog will disrupt the nest!

Dogs are curious, and once they locate a rabbit nest, it can be difficult to get them to leave the nest alone. Since rabbits grow up so fast, it only takes a few temporary modifications to allow the kits to grow up healthy and safely. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Walk your dog in a different part of your yard away from the nest.
2. Take your dog on a walk or to the dog park instead of exercising in your yard.
3. Keep your dogs on a leash or tie-out out that is too short to reach the nest.
4. Cover the cottontail nest while your dog is out.
 - a. Use a laundry basket or milk crate to cover the nest.
 - b. Place something heavy on top or on the edges of the basket to weigh it down so that your dog doesn't knock the basket off.
 - c. This cover **MUST** be removed by 8 pm each night to allow the mother to come feed the babies at dusk and dawn. The nest may be left covered during the daytime hours.

IMPORTANT

This short inconvenience for you and your dog will be a lifesaver for the baby bunnies!

I've touched the babies. Won't mom abandon them?

No, a mother rabbit will not abandon her babies because you touched them. While it is advisable to handle them as little as possible, and to wear gloves while doing so, you can rest assured that mom will return to care for her little ones if she is able.

You can save the lives kits by checking for nests before you:

- Mow your grass.
- Trim weeds or bushes.
- Rototill your garden.
- Burn a brush pile or use a fire pit.
- Rake long-standing leaf piles or mulch.



Here is an example of how to cover a nest to protect it from your dog. Remember, this must be removed every night so mom can feed the babies.



This young rabbit was a victim of a fire when some unsuspecting homeowners started a fire in their fire pit in the spring. Note the damaged and curled tips of his ears.

I'm worried about outdoor or feral cats hurting the babies.

It is true, outdoor cats, whether owned or feral, are a big problem for wildlife which is why we advocate for keeping cats inside, or being contained in an outdoor porch or catio. Young rabbits in a nest will often go undetected by cats as long as you don't draw any attention to the nest. Even with the potential threat of free-roaming cats, it is important to let the mother rabbit have the chance to raise her young. If the cat has already discovered the nest, you can use the laundry basket method described above to protect the babies during the daytime hours. There is not much that can be done to protect them at night since the basket needs to be removed to allow the mother to feed the babies at night.



I have a garden and I don't want all the rabbits eating my produce.

The kits in your yard will leave the nest in a few weeks, and will quickly move on to find their own territory. If you are having problems with rabbits in your garden, the most effective and inexpensive means to protect your garden from rabbits is by putting a fence around the perimeter of the garden. It doesn't take a very tall or sturdy fence to keep rabbits out. A chicken-wire fence 24" to 36" tall, with the bottom few inches buried in the ground, or secured to the ground is sufficient. Welded hardware cloth is an alternate and sturdier option. Whatever material you choose, the holes in the mesh should be 1 inch or less to keep all rabbits of all sizes out.

There are also a variety of repellents you can try, but be aware that repellents are often not labeled for use on plants destined to be eaten by people. Repellents also may need to be reapplied frequently to remain effective, especially after rains. Please read the application instructions carefully.

While trapping and removal of the rabbit may seem like a good option, the removal of one rabbit will not solve your problem. It's kind of like the old saying, "if you build it, they will come". You have planted a plentiful array of good food for rabbits in your garden, so more will come to take part in the buffet if you do not protect it with a fence. Trapping and relocation may seem like a humane option for the rabbit, but this is often not the case. A rabbit live trapped between March and October may very well be a mother with babies which will then become orphaned. The mother may be distressed as she searches for the babies, and the babies will surely not survive without her care. The trapped rabbit is released in a foreign environment without knowledge of the resources or risks in the area. Without knowing these things, the odds of survival are stacked against the rabbit. For more information on live trapping and other humane exclusion options, visit The Humane Society of the United States website. http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/scrap_the_trap.html.

