

THE ATLANTIC DAILY

What Do I Do With This Baby Squirrel?

Wildlife experts answer pressing springtime questions.

By Elaine Godfrey




A volunteer at City Wildlife feeds a squirrel. (Courtesy of Elaine Godfrey)

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This is an edition of The Atlantic Daily, a newsletter that guides you through the biggest stories of the day, helps you discover new ideas, and recommends the best in culture. [Sign up for it here.](#)

This week, I talked to wildlife experts about my most pressing springtime animal questions. But first, here are three stories from *The Atlantic*:

- [The narcissists who endanger America](#)
- [An acute attack of Trumpism in Tennessee](#)
- [Adult ADHD is the Wild West of psychiatry.](#)

Making Themselves Known

When spring rolls around each year, my brain launches into a frantic running commentary. *What is that bird doing?* I wonder to myself as I walk around. *This deer looks like Bambi. Why is that small rabbit all alone? Oh, no, his mother must be dead—like Bambi's! Should I bring him inside and raise him as my own?*

I am not the only one with questions. This is the busiest time of the year for wildlife rescuers and rehabilitators, whose job involves fielding inquiries from concerned citizens like myself. After a long winter, animals are suddenly making themselves known: coming out of hibernation and brumation, emerging from their hidey-holes. They're having babies and crisscrossing roads and falling out of trees during wind storms. And we humans are encountering them in their various states of vulnerability.

So this week, I drove out to City Wildlife, a wildlife-rehabilitation center in Washington, D.C., to ask experts about the kinds of advice they find themselves doling out every spring. At the office, in the northwest part of the city, a flightless pigeon named Sally greeted me with a tilt of his head from his cage at the door. Four box turtles injured in lawn-equipment accidents were recovering in big plastic tubs. In

a back room, volunteers were bottle-feeding baby squirrels, which was so cute I thought I might pass out.

At City Wildlife, I interviewed the experts Jen Mattioli and Jim Monsma—and then, for some regional diversity, I called the wildlife-rehabilitation specialist Tim Jasinski at the Lake Erie Nature & Science Center, in Ohio. Below, I've summarized the questions that both centers most often receive, and their best advice.

Some top-line notes: Baby animals are rarely abandoned by their parents; if you see them alone, it's very likely that their parents are coming back. Touching a baby isn't usually advisable, but your scent isn't going to stop a baby's mother from taking care of it either. When in doubt, call your local wildlife center. And *for the love of God*, keep your cats inside.

RECOMMENDED READING



The Disturbing Sound of a Human Voice

ED YONG



The Miseducation of the American Boy

PEGGY ORENSTEIN



The Pandemic Could End Waiting in Line

ELISSAVETA M. BRANDON

What do I do with this baby squirrel I found?

It's baby-squirrel season! Other offices might have March Madness pools, but at City Wildlife, employees take bets on what day the first baby squirrels will arrive. The drop-offs began in earnest last week, with 18 babies brought to the center after severe storms knocked over their nests. The most common reasons for orphaned squirrels? Heavy winds and springtime tree-cutting.

The expert advice: If you find a baby squirrel sitting quietly on his own, he probably hasn't been abandoned. Leave him where he is or, if you can reach his leafy nest, put him back inside it. His mother will probably return for him. You can identify an orphaned or abandoned baby squirrel by how desperate he's acting: If he approaches you eagerly or climbs up your leg, he's probably starving. Put him in a shoebox with air holes and bring him to your local wildlife rehabber for care.

Are these bunnies abandoned?

Eastern cottontails, the most common rabbits in North America, build their nests in shallow dugouts and line them with grass and fur. The thing to know about rabbits is that they are extremely chill parents: The mother leaves her babies alone for most of the day, returning only in the mornings and evenings to feed them. So the babies aren't alone—they're just alone *right now*.

The expert advice: Leave the nest of babies where it is. If your dog needs to walk in the yard, cover the nest temporarily with a laundry basket to protect the babies, then remove it when the dog goes back inside. If the mother is dead—maybe your dog or cat got to her—then call your local wildlife rehabber for next steps.

Can I bring this tiny deer inside?!

Don't! Like rabbits, mother deer leave their baby alone for most of the day, returning only in the evenings to feed them.

The expert advice: If you find a baby deer in your yard or in the woods, leave him alone. Yes, it will be hard, because he's so cute. But his mother will be back. If a fawn seems injured or is approaching people, call your local wildlife specialist for instructions.

Does this scruffy-looking bird need help?

Baby birds can be confusing. It helps to know the difference between nestlings and fledglings. Nestlings are naked and skinny, like a Skeksis from Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal*. Sometimes you'll find nestlings in the spring that have fallen from their nests or were kicked out by parasitic birds. Fledglings are flightless but have feathers—the fuzzy, windswept version of their adult parents.

The expert advice: If you find a nestling on the ground that is still alive, call a local rehabber for advice; *sometimes* it can be re-nested. A fledgling, by contrast, will be okay by herself. She might look pretty helpless hopping along a sidewalk or yard. But don't worry: Her mother is somewhere nearby. If the fledgling is near a busy road, it's okay to move her to a bush nearby.

A key way to protect these vulnerable baby birds? Keep your cat inside. Cats—although adorable!—are backyard super-predators that kill fledglings and migratory birds. According to a 2013 study, cats may kill billions of birds each year in the United States alone.

One more thing: Bird migration is happening right now in the eastern United States, and people are encountering adult birds that have been stunned or killed by flying into windows. Glass kills as many as 1 billion birds every year in America, and experts have tips on how to make your windows bird-friendly. If you come across a concussed bird, call your local wildlife center.

For humans, spring is all pink blossoms and green grass and rainy days. But spring is a particularly vulnerable season in an animal's early life. The more we know, the more we can help them out.

Related:

- The future of conservation is basically Shazam for wildlife.
- America's most misunderstood marsupial

Today's News

1. In a private ceremony late last night, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill that would ban most abortions in the state after six weeks of pregnancy. A forthcoming state-supreme-court ruling on Florida's 15-week abortion ban, which was passed last year, will determine if the new ban takes effect.

2. The Air National Guardsman accused of leaking classified U.S. documents was officially charged in Boston federal court with unauthorized retention and transmission of national defense information and unauthorized removal and retention of classified documents or material.
3. Travel resumed at the Fort Lauderdale–Hollywood International Airport after monumental rains and flooding forced the travel hub to shut down Wednesday.

Dispatches

- **The Books Briefing:** Maya Chung rounds up books that ponder the empty promise of good intentions.

[Explore all of our newsletters here.](#)

Evening Read





By Spencer Kornhaber

The indie-rock band The National has long served as a mascot for a certain type of guy: literary, self-effacing, mordantly cool. With cryptic lyrics and brooding instrumentation, the quintet of scruffy brothers and schoolmates from Ohio conveys the yearnings of the sensitive male psyche. The band's lead singer, Matt Berninger, has a voice so doleful and deep that it seems to emanate from a cavern. His typical narrator is a wallflower pining for validation from the life of the party—the romantic swooning of a man in need of rescue.

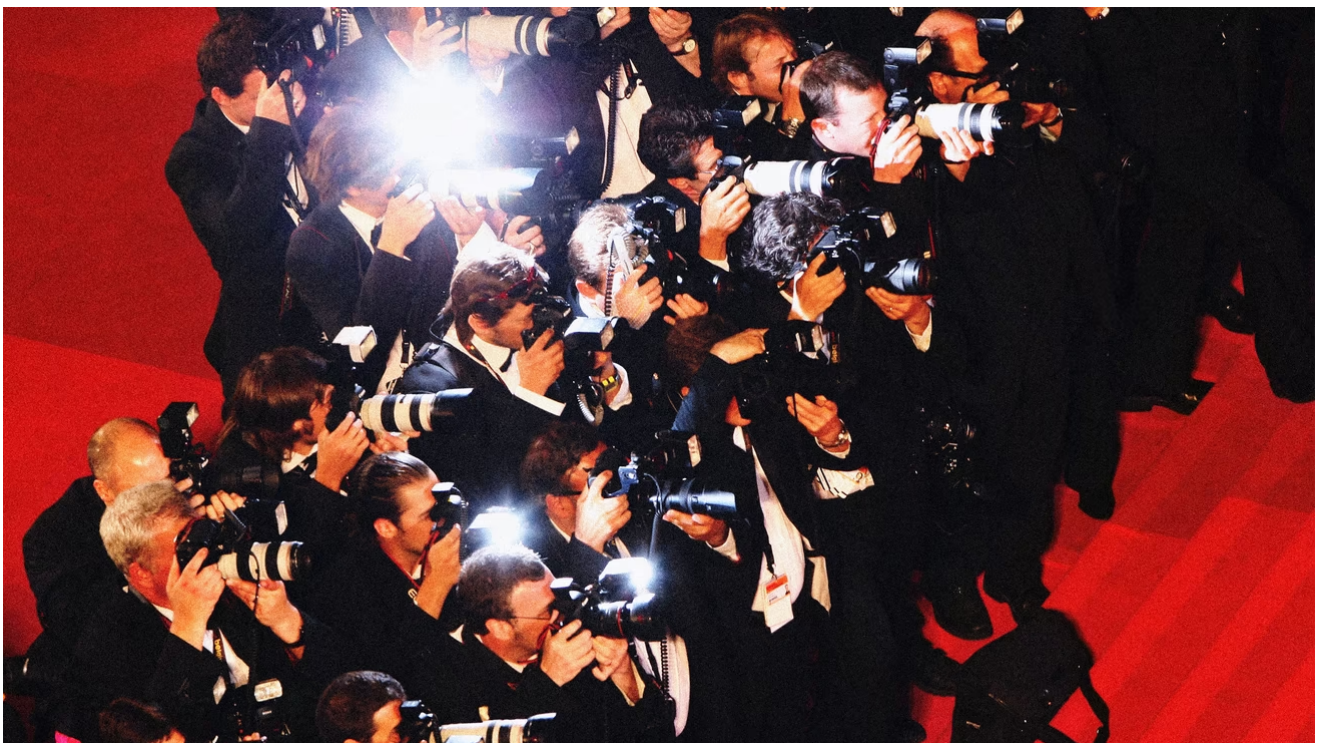
In the mid-to-late aughts, as The National was gathering acclaim with darkly experimental albums, another artist was rising to prominence: Taylor Swift. On the surface, these two acts are starkly different. Where The National's songwriting is impressionistic, Swift's is diaristic—built on personal stories that typically forgo abstraction or even difficult metaphor. Where The National's charisma lies in its mysteriousness, Swift earnestly says just what she means. The National is known for somber dude-rock; Swift found fame with anthems of heartbroken but upbeat young-womanhood. (In her 2012 hit “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” she even jabbed at pretentious guys who are obsessed with dude-rock, like the ex who ran off to listen to “some indie record that's much cooler than mine.”) The National became the house band for a certain segment of Millennial yuppies; Swift became one of the biggest stars in the world.

[Read the full article.](#)

More From *The Atlantic*

- A single judge shouldn't have this kind of national power.
- Seltzer is torture.
- The mirror test is broken.

Culture Break



Georges De Keerle / Getty

Read. Two new books argue that America urgently needs to reevaluate its child-welfare system.

And these seven celebrities published actually great memoirs.

Watch. Netflix's *Beef* brings TV viewers the antiheroine (played by Ali Wong) they've been missing.

P.S.

This week, one of my favorite reads was [this profile of Stormy Daniels](#), the adult-film star at the center of Donald Trump's indictment. You've probably read about the alleged hush-money payments by now and the contours of the Manhattan district attorney's case. But this story, by Olivia Nuzzi, offers a really human look at what it's like to be Daniels in this turbulent moment.

— Elaine

Kelli María Korducki contributed to this newsletter.