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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Friday, April 4, 2025

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As spring sets in, IDNR issues reminder to avoid handling wild animals and birds

SPRINGFIELD – As spring sets in and more people head outside, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is reminding everyone to leave baby birds and young animals alone when they encounter them in the wild.

Well-intentioned people may believe they're helping nature by taking possession of young rabbits, fawn deer, baby birds and other animals that appear to be orphaned or abandoned. However, in nearly all cases, human intervention does more to hurt animals than to help. Young birds and animals are still being fed and cared for by their parents, who usually stay away from nests and dens if humans are nearby.

"The most helpful thing people can do for wildlife is to enjoy the animals through observation, not interference," **said IDNR Director Natalie Phelps Finnie.** "If you really care about the animals, just leave them alone when you come across them in nature."

The Illinois Wildlife Code provides legal protection for wildlife. Keeping wild animals as pets, or to raise wild animals believed to have been abandoned is prohibited. Additionally, agency responses to incidents involving illegal captive wildlife can be costly and divert time from other important work.

Most wild birds are protected by the Wildlife Code. This includes protection of eggs, nests, and feathers. Migratory birds are also protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

Some additional reminders about wildlife in Illinois:

- **Birds:** Birds often leave the nest before they can fly. Known as fledglings, these birds will live on the ground for a few days while they grow flight feathers, and you may hear them making noises calling for their parents. They do this so their parents will continue to feed them, and it doesn't mean they are in trouble. Keep children and pets away.
- **Deer:** A fawn left on its own is not necessarily abandoned. Young fawns don't possess the speed or stamina to flee until they are about 2 weeks old. As a result, their mothers will leave them to lie quietly and motionless in nearby tall grass or brushy cover while they forage. A fawn may truly be orphaned if you notice it in the same spot for two or three days and constantly calling for its mother. At that point, it's time to call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator to aid the fawn.
- **Rabbits:** Rabbits often build their nests in shallow holes or depressions in the ground, and they're frequently found in the middle of lawns and gardens. Mother rabbits commonly return to the nest only at dusk and dawn to feed their young, limiting daytime activity to prevent predators from noticing. Rabbits

will begin to leave the nest around three or four weeks of age. Young rabbits outside the nest do not need help, but it's important to keep children or pets away from the nest and venturing babies.

Know the rules for feeding and handling wildlife

There are strict rules on feeding wildlife in areas where wild deer are present, as laid out in Illinois Administrative Code 17-635. It's also a good idea to limit feeding other wildlife species. To limit nuisance activity, do not leave pet food outside at night, clean up under bird feeders, secure the lids on garbage cans to keep raccoons and other wildlife out, and don't feed Canada geese in urban or suburban areas.

Handling wild animals can result in the handler being bitten. According to the Centers for Disease Control, wild mammals that bite a person should be euthanized immediately and tested for rabies. Many species of wildlife can also carry zoonotic diseases, which are diseases that can be passed on to people. Some of these diseases are serious and can even be fatal.

Illinois has experienced multiple Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (bird flu) mortality events in wild birds, mostly waterfowl, this winter. The public is reminded not to handle or attempt to capture waterfowl or other wild birds displaying signs of illness. Go online for more information.

Wildlife generally have more offspring than habitats can support. This means it's normal for many offspring to become part of the food chain and not survive. It's difficult to see this play out in person, but it's very common, and most species continue to thrive even if more than half of their young don't survive to adulthood.

"We understand that the desire to help wildlife is strong, but it often comes at a cost," **said IDNR wildlife chief Mike Wefer**. "Survival rates for relocated wildlife are very low, and the risk of accidentally moving diseases from one place to another is high."

Anyone with questions about care for possibly abandoned wildlife should contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator before removing or relocating wildlife to be sure it's in the best interest of the animal and ensure the rehabber has the room and expertise to treat it.

To learn more about orphaned animals; potential wildlife conflicts; and keeping people, pets, and wildlife safe, visit Wildlife Illinois.

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