Winter seems like a distant memory. Trees and flowers are blossoming, birds are building nests and critters are being born.

This is also the time of year when the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) receives calls about “abandoned” animals that people believe may be in need of rescue.

However, these rescues may do more harm than good.

After giving birth, adult wildlife must forage to provide food for themselves and their young. This means leaving their newborns for short periods. Having some basic knowledge of wildlife and the survival skills animals use is important in understanding most wildlife doesn’t need rescuing.

Common targets of misplaced rescues are baby deer, temporarily left in a safe place while their mother feeds nearby. Many people who find fawns mistakenly assume the young deers’ mothers abandoned them, when, in reality, the parents are in the process of ensuring the infants’ survival.

“In most cases, it is absolutely not in the fawn’s best interest to try to rescue it,” said Alan Knothe, a wildlife biologist who handles wildlife calls in the FWC’s Panama City office.

Knothe says people typically discover fawns that are waiting for their mother. Often, people find a fawn in brush or other cover, where a doe has placed her new offspring for protection. These settings tend to help mask the fawn’s scent, thus providing good protection from the keen nose of a predator.

People discover these seemingly abandoned baby deer and become concerned when the parent is nowhere in sight. Sometimes the would-be rescuer falsely believes the young animal will perish unless they save it or take it to a wildlife rehabilitation center. Others take the fawns, thinking only about making a pet of the animal.

“Unfortunately, actions of this kind usually have the opposite effect of a rescue,” Knothe said. “The stress created by changing the animal’s diet and surroundings is often fatal.

“If the rescued fawn manages to survive, its return to the wild is practically impossible because of human imprinting or a lack of survival skills. If it had remained wild, the young deer would have learned the necessary survival skills from its mother.”

Another way to help with the survival of the young animals is to not feed them. Although that may sound odd, feeding can cause problems ranging from poor nutrition to making the animal dependent on humans for food, to loss of foraging skills, all of which can decrease the critter’s chances of survival.
“These animals have survived for a long time without assistance. They can continue to survive without handouts,” Knothe said.

The FWC recommends that if you find a fawn or other baby animal, don’t touch it, and quietly leave the area. Touching the animal may cause the mother to reject it because human scent contaminated it.

On the other hand, songbirds have almost no sense of smell. People can return baby birds to their nest without much chance of rejection. This time of year, young songbirds found on the ground look a bit dazed or confused. The youngster may be trying to hide in tall grass or in low bushes to avoid discovery by predators. These young birds are going through a process called fledging.

When they’re ready to fledge, young birds have grown all the adult feathers they’ll need to fly, but they still must learn to fly. During this process, the immature birds sometimes end up on the ground, where they may spend several days before they learn all their flight skills.

“While on the ground, the juvenile birds’ parents watch over them, feeding them and helping them learn necessary survival skills. Help the parents by keeping any pets, particularly cats, inside or out of the way,” Knothe said. “Please don’t interfere in this crucial learning process.”

Here are some important facts that can help determine if a baby bird needs rescuing. According to biologists, the only time people should rescue a baby songbird is when it is on the ground and has almost no feathers, when pets injure the bird or its tail is less than a half-inch long, and it cannot hop around on its own.

In those circumstances Knothe recommends putting baby birds in a lined hanging planter in a tree near the actual nest location. He said the location should be in the shade and hidden from the view of predators, if possible.

“Most parents will come back to care for the fledgling. Sometimes, however, they reject the chick because of a limited food supply, an inability to care for the young chick, or for other reasons we may not understand,” Knothe said. “If the parents don’t return, then the chick should be taken to a rehab center. Migratory birds are protected and need to be cared for by a licensed facility.”

The FWC’s Panama City Regional Office, 850-265-3676, has a list of rehabbers. Many local veterinarians also work closely with wildlife rehabilitators and can be a good source of advice.

The FWC asks you to remember that removing an animal from the wild to save it may actually have the opposite effect. Seek advice from wildlife professionals before attempting to rescue any animal and please remember: In most cases, it is better to leave wildlife wild.

For more information on Florida’s wildlife and what you can do to help, go to MyFWC.com/Wildlife and select “Living with Wildlife.”