



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

March 18, 2024

Spring has SPRUNG

After all of the rain we received this winter, Spring is finally here and with it, our first orphaned animal babies in need of care.

The first to arrive are usually squirrels and hummingbirds.

After just 14-19 days of gestation in the nest, Anna's Hummingbirds emerge from their shells. As soon as the female is pregnant, they begin the complicated and important work of building a nest so that it is sturdy, sheltered, and close to a food source. Once hatched, the hummingbirds will spend around 20 days in the nest as they are fed and grow. Anna's (our most common hummingbird species at CWC) will lay 1-2 eggs twice a year.

These nests are tiny (the size of half a lime) and can be easily missed when trimming bushes or trees. We recommend that you trim only in the winter for this reason. Each year we receive hundreds of hummingbirds whose nests have been cut down and made homeless. We get thousands of calls from the public about "abandoned nests." Concerned citizens are worried that they are not seeing the mother come and feed the babies and are worried that the mom has been injured. While that does happen, it's more likely that the mother is just waiting until humans aren't around to feed her babies. Feeding their young can take just seconds and will happen almost every 15 minutes during daylight hours. The best thing to do is to give the nest space and allow the mother to tend to her nestlings.

It's also important to keep any pets away from the nesting area, especially as the babies learn to fly. Unlike what you might see fictionalized on television, most birds do not spontaneously fly on their first try. They will develop wing strength by flapping in the nest as they grow. Then they will slowly glide from the nest and spend some amount of time on the ground as they learn and gain muscle to fly. This is when the young birds are most vulnerable to predators like cats. Every year we receive hundreds of animals caught by cats and dogs, most of whom do not survive. Nestling hummingbirds weigh just 0.62 grams, the same as 1/16 of a tablespoon of flour—no match for the sharp teeth and claws of a cat.



Hummingbirds shortly after emerging from eggs



Ready to take flight



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Five-week-old Squirrel



Squirrel cuddles

We know it's Spring when infant Fox Squirrels begin to arrive. Like Anna's Hummingbirds, these tree squirrels can give birth twice a year. They create nests from leaves (these nests are called "dreys") and the young squirrels (kits) will stay in the nest for 12-16 weeks until weaned and able to explore. The female squirrels will build four to five nests—one is a primary nest and the others exist in case the first is destroyed or the mother determines the first is unsafe. If weather or tree trimming tears down one nest, the mother will quickly pick up the kits and move them to the second nest. It is during this transfer that humans sometimes find the babies and pick them up, thinking them abandoned. If you find young squirrels that are unharmed on the ground, call us and we will walk you through how to create a temporary nest in a tree so that the mother can find her babies and bring them to safety.

It does happen that young kits fall from their nests—windy days are always followed by increased intakes at CWC. If the squirrel you find on the ground is injured or has a bloody nose (often as a result of their fall), then they do require professional care and a rehabber should be contacted.

Every year, our Neonatal Infant Care Unit (NICU) fills first with squirrels and hummingbirds, and then as they age out, young birds of other species arrive. Our NICU requires specialized equipment such as incubators to keep young animals warm, diets unique to species and age of each animal, and enclosures that will keep them safe as they grow. Young animals are incredibly labor-intensive to care for as well, as they may need to be fed as often as every 15 or 30 minutes from 7am-8pm. We rely on our fantastic corps of volunteers to feed and clean and care for these vulnerable young.