



A raccoon in broad daylight enjoying some leftover birdseed. By Morgan Barnes.

## Wildlife Myths and Misconceptions

By Morgan Barnes

Birds are singing, cicadas are buzzing, and...raccoons are out in the daytime? Summer is officially here, and that means wildlife is out and about, searching for food, raising their young, and seeking new territory. Many animals share our human spaces with us, and as we spend more time outside, we're bound to run into them going about their lives. So to prepare for all of the wonderful wildlife encounters that summertime brings, I'd like to dispel some common wildlife misconceptions!

One of my fondest memories from childhood is heading to the park and feeding the ducks some bread. Only now am I learning that bread isn't a healthy food for ducks, and it can actually harm them in the long term. Bread is full of carbs, and not much else—therefore, it doesn't offer much nutritional value for the ducks, and can cause unhealthy weight gain. There are many healthy alternatives for feeding ducks, including frozen peas, grains like barley and oats, and grapes (cut them in half first!). Feeding ducks is a great way to get to know your local wildlife—just make sure it's healthy for them!

Something that we hear a lot as bird biologists is that friends have found an “abandoned” baby bird in their yard. Animals do not make a habit of abandoning their babies, so there are several reasons for why you might find a baby bird all alone on the ground. If the baby is featherless or covered in downy feathers, it has likely fallen out of the nest, and the parents are still feeding it! If you can, place the baby bird back in the nest. It is a common misconception that birds will abandon their babies due to human scent. If you find a feathered young bird on the ground, it is a fledgling, and it’s learning to fly. Try and keep pets away from fledglings, as they can’t escape easily just yet!

In a similar vein, if you find an “abandoned” fawn (young deer) without mom in sight, leave it there! Mother deer leave their fawns alone almost all day, only checking on them occasionally, to keep them safe from predators. The mother will return, so leave them be! If you find an injured animal, do not touch it, or attempt to feed it; call your local wildlife rehabilitator immediately.

Another common misconception about wildlife is that if a nocturnal animal, like a raccoon, fox, or opossum, is seen outside during daylight hours, then that animal must have rabies. This is just not true! Animals can be outside in the daytime for many, many reasons that are not because they are infected with rabies. While nocturnal animals prefer the cover of night for most of their activity, sometimes there’s just not enough hours in the night to get everything done!

With hungry babies to feed, mother animals must spend large amounts of time searching for food, which might happen during the day. After those hungry babies grow up into hungry adults, they leave mom and dad and search for a new home. Because territories nearby where they grew up are occupied, young animals may have to search for long distances, and during the day, to find a new home. Seeing nocturnal wildlife during the day isn’t a bad thing—try and appreciate seeing these secretive creatures in the light!

Summertime is full of life—get out there and see it!

Photo caption: A raccoon in broad daylight enjoying some leftover birdseed.