

# The Parenting Game

By JAN WELSH

Barred owl owlet

**R**

leep! Reep! An almost-grown baby owl is hanging out in my yard, begging for food. Even though this owlet has grown as big as its parents and has begun hunting for its own food, it has been making this sound—*reeping*—every 30 seconds, night after night, trying to convince its parents to bring a treat. Mom and Dad Owl, on the other hand, have worked hard all summer raising this bird, and they have finished their parenting duties for the season. Now they expect the youngster to find its own dinner. Call it owl tough love.

All animals have parents, but different animals receive different amounts and kinds of parental care. Most insects, fish, reptiles, and amphibians provide little, if any, care to their offspring. Birds and mammals have more highly developed brains and need to learn more in order to survive. They learn what they need to know from their parents.

MINNESOTA CONSERVATION VOLUNTEER

CREDITS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: E. R. DEGINGER, DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES (DPA); UMD-NRRI; SKIP WOODY, DPA; GARY MESZAROS, DPA; MARY CLAY, DPA

Fox squirrel pups

Skunk kits

Green frog tadpoles

Red fox kit

Canada lynx kitten

ALLEN BLAKE SHELTON





White-tailed deer fawn

STEPHEN B. ANTUS JR.

## Ready or Not

Some babies need lots of care from their parents before they can even leave their nest or den.

**Bear cubs, fox kits, and loon chicks**, for example, arrive in the world with their eyes sealed shut.

**Baby birds** are covered with fluffy feathers called *down*. Later they grow adult feathers, including those for flying.

**Cottontail rabbit kits** are born naked and blind, in a scrape the doe (mother rabbit) made on the ground. After covering the kits with leaves and grass, the doe leaves them all day and returns after dark to feed them. In a few days, baby rabbits can open their eyes and take care of themselves.

*Jan Welsh coordinates Project WILD for the DNR Nongame Wildlife Program when her 6-year-old son is not reeping.*

**White-tailed deer fawns** are born with their eyes open and can run within hours. But they can't run very far, so they spend much of their time hiding. The doe (mother deer) returns to feed her fawns once or twice a day.

**Ducklings** hatch ready to swim and feed themselves the same day. If they were blind and helpless for even a few days, they'd be, well, sitting ducks for hungry skunks, raccoons, foxes, and other predators. The hen (mother duck) usually lays a *clutch*, or group, of eight to 15 duck eggs in spring or early summer. The ducklings stay with her for protection until midsummer when they can fly.

**Beaver kits** can swim the day after they're born, but they cannot defend themselves against predators, such as wolves and coyotes. The kits live with the parents for two years.

BILL MARCHEL



Rabbit kit



Mallard ducklings

RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH





Northern harrier nestlings



Raccoon kit



Western painted turtle hatchling

# Home Special Home

Part of good parenting is seeking out good habitat to shelter the young. **Grassland birds**, such as **northern harriers** and **upland sandpipers**, need habitat with a variety of grasses to hide from predators such as raccoons. Sandpiper chicks scamper through clumps of big bluestem and Indiangrass in search of food. Grassland birds build their grassy nests on the ground.

Animals need to move in the cover of native plants wherever they live—in a forest, on the prairie, or along the lakeshore. When people cut down or uproot plants in or near a lake, waves roll into shore with greater force because nothing stops them. This wave action erodes the shore and makes it hard for **walleyes**, **bluegills**, **perch**, and **other fish** to find good places for spawning

and for sheltering newly hatched offspring.

Good habitat is important to **painted turtles** as well. After mating in the spring, the female travels over land to find a sunny place with loose soil or sand. She releases water from her bladder to moisten the soil, then uses her hind legs to excavate a nest. After laying eggs, she leaves until next spring, when she returns to lay another clutch of eggs.

The eggs may begin hatching after 80 days, or the eggs might overwinter and hatch the following spring. Higher temperatures in the nest tend to produce more female turtles, while lower nest temperatures produce more males. Predators such as raccoons and skunks can smell a nest, then find it and eat the eggs.

NORTHERN HARRIER NESTLINGS AND RACCOON BY BILL MARCHEL; TURTLE BY ALLEN BLAKE SHELDON



Perch eggs

ERIC ENGBRETSON



# Work, Work, Work!

From an eagle's nest to a beaver lodge to a hive of bees, parents shelter their young in many ways. A female **timber rattlesnake** prepares for the birth of her litter by seeking out a rocky den and sunning herself nearby. The warmer she is, the more quickly her babies develop. She stays with her newborns for about a week.

In midwinter, a **black bear** mom gives birth to one to three cubs in a den, perhaps dug in the ground or tucked under a fallen tree. The cubs snuggle up to a warm bare spot on her belly. They nurse and grow, then emerge with their mother from the den in late March or early April.

While mammal babies develop inside their mother, bird babies develop outside their mother in eggs. Keeping the eggs warm is a big job, especially on chilly spring

days. On their bellies, many adult birds have a **brood patch**—bare skin with many blood vessels that warm it. The parents rest the brood patch on the eggs when incubating them. Ducks and other birds without brood patches pull out their down feathers to insulate the nest.

Some birds, such as **common flickers** and **screech owls**, nest in a cavity (hole) in a tree. Cavity nesters such as **bluebirds** and **wood ducks** may nest in human-made boxes.



Wood duck ducklings

DON ENGER

## "Who's Home?"

Only mom and babies are at home in the **wood duck** house. The male wood duck leaves the female after mating. His brightly colored feathers would attract predators if he incubated the eggs.

On the other hand, social animals (including **wolves**, **coyotes**, and **crows**) often have large family groups. Several adults may share duties such as guarding and feeding young.

MARY CLAY, DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES



Opossum joeys

## "Don't Make Me Stop This Car"

**Opossum** moms are the true minivans of the mammal world. The mother carries her joeys on her back until they are old enough to keep up with her. Other wild parents also carry their young.

Sometimes a baby **bat** clings to its mother as she flies through the dark, hunting for insects. **Loon** chicks ride on the parent's back to stay out of cold water and away from predators such as muskies.

The female **stinkbug** glues a small clutch of eggs on a leaf and guards them until they hatch. If predators approach, she threatens to spray her stinky smell.

The **giant water bug** mom lays a large clutch of eggs on the dad's back. Sticky stuff keeps the eggs on Dad until the baby bugs hatch and swim away.

In sand or gravel in shallow water, a male **bluegill** scrapes a bowl-shaped depression, called a **redd**, for eggs. Before and after spawning, he defends the nest against all intruders, especially other male sunfish. When his young fry leave the nest, so does he.



Bluegill redd

ERIC ENGBRETSON

## "All I Do Is Pick Up After You Kids"

A **songbird** nest would be a messy place if it weren't for a membrane that surrounds each chick's *feces* (droppings). The parent grabs the **fecal sac** and deposits it away from the nest.



House wren fecal sac

MICHAEL UNOLD

## "Eat Your Spinach"



Coyote pups

STEPHEN B. ANTUS JR.

**T**here are no drive-through windows with Happy Meals in the wilderness. In fact, mealtime can be a real challenge. Until young animals can find their own food, parents must work hard to feed them.

### "OPEN WIDE"

Before they can catch their own food, **coyote** pups eat regurgitated food from both parents. After eating tasty fish, a **pelican** parent passes partially digested fish into its nestling's bill. A **mourning dove** feeds its nestlings "milk" from the lining of its crop (a pouch that holds food before it goes to the stomach). Yum!



Pelican nestling

DOMINIQUE BRAUD

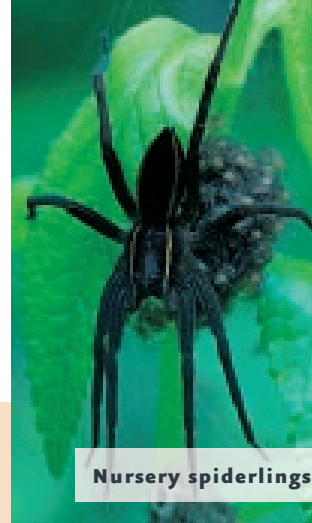
**Songbirds** make hundreds of trips per day to deliver insects and other food to hungry nestlings, which open wide their beaks, showing a bright pink lining that makes a good target for the parents to stuff the goodies into.

DOMINIQUE BRAUD

American robin nestlings



RICHARD HAUG



Nursery spiderlings

## "THINK OF ALL THE STARVING CHILDREN"

Some kinds of **spider** moms do nothing to care for their young, while other moms carry their little ones. Some spider moms sacrifice themselves for their babies to eat. Some spiderlings simply eat each other. **Bluebottle flies** lay eggs on dead animals to provide food for newly hatched larvae, called *maggots*.

Female mammals feed their young with nutritious milk from mammary glands. The mother **opossum** may have more than 13 young, but she has only 13 teats for feeding. Her joeys must rush to latch onto one. Those that go hungry eventually die.

## "BE GOOD TO YOUR BROTHER...!"

Maybe you've heard your mom or dad say this and add, "Someday you'll miss him." In the case of **white pelicans**, maybe they won't. Pelican parents begin incubating after the first egg is laid. When a younger one hatches, the older chicks pick on it, sometimes until it dies.

## "CALL ME WHEN YOU GET THERE"

Minnesota **monarch butterflies** and many birds migrate to warmer places to spend the winter. Many young animals make the trip without Mom and Dad to show them the way. After their parents head to the Gulf Coast, young **common loons** stay another month to eat and grow before the long journey. The young loons live in southern waters for four or five years, until breeding age. Then, amazingly, they find their way back to the Minnesota lake where they were raised.

CARL R. SAMS JR., DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES



Loon chick



# Animal School

Some animal parents teach their young how to find food and navigate their home territory. They also teach them how to avoid danger.

**Bear** cubs stay with Mom for two years. They follow her to learn where to find the best food, where to take cover from storms, and other skills. As the mother bear prepares to breed again, she begins to act aggressively toward the cubs by snarling and swatting at them, which convinces them to go off on their own. Young bears in search of new territories sometimes look for a quick meal in bird feeders and garbage cans.

An important job of parents is to encourage the young at crucial points in their development. **Raptors** may screech to their young as they attempt to *fledge*, or leave the nest for the first time.

**Wolf** pups chase and wrestle each other to develop hunting and social skills. After a few months, they join the family on hunts.



Black bear cubs



Wolf pups

CLAUDIA ADAMS, DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES

## A BIG IMPRESSION

*Imprinting* is a process in which young birds and mammals develop an attachment to the parent and learn to identify members of the same species. Animals that depend on their parents for care often imprint on the first animal they see after they are hatched or born.

Imprinting comes in handy for wildlife researchers when they try to study young animals. If imprinted on humans, young **wild turkeys**, **pheasants**, and **grouse** prefer to be with people. As a result, researchers can easily observe their behavior.



Grouse chick

BILL MARCHEL

## ATTENTION TEACHERS!

To find an online teachers guide for this article, visit [www.dnr.state.mn.us/young\\_naturalists/parenting](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/young_naturalists/parenting). To learn more about using *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer* as a teaching tool, contact Meredith McNab, [meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us](mailto:meredith.mcnab@dnr.state.mn.us) or 651-215-0615.

## BABY BIRD MYTH

**Myth:** If you find a baby bird, you can't return it to the nest because the parent will smell your human scent and reject the chick.

**Reality:** Most birds have a poor sense of smell. Place the bird back in the nest. If it's learning to fly and continues to fall out of the nest, keep people and pets away for a day or so until it gets the hang of it. ●