

Abandoned Wildlife ... Really?



a desert place

Natural beauty
through preservation

Throughout the summer, the *Sentinel* is publishing its popular "A Desert Place" columns from 1987. The columns were provided by members of the Cave Creek Improvement Association's Desert Awareness Committee.

By BERT EDISES

"Look at the little baby javelina!" exclaimed the lady on the horse.

While the other riders reined in and watched, the lady got off her horse, took the baby peccary out of its shelter underneath a large palo verde and announced to her traveling companions, "I'm sure its mother has abandoned it. I'll just take it home and look after it. It'll make a darling pet."

And with that, the lady remounted, placing the tiny animal on the saddle in front of her.

Her riding companions praised the public spirit she had shown in rescuing an orphaned or abandoned creature from death in the merciless desert.

But, was the little javelina really abandoned? Was it really orphaned? And would it really make a darling pet?

"Perhaps," is the answer to the first two queries. Small animals do lose parents and sometimes are abandoned.

But it is far more probable that the tiny animal's mother had only left its lair to forage for food and would have returned in a short while.

To assume arbitrarily that an immature animal is lost or abandoned, and to take it home with the intention of making it a pet is to condemn the animal to an unnatural lifestyle and, in many cases, an early and cruel death.

The fact is that few non-professionals are able to apply the exacting techniques of caring for a wild creature in an urban setting, such as feeding.

Each species of wildlife and any given species at different stages of its development has its own food needs and preferences.

It so happens that the natural diet of the javelina is one of the most difficult to reproduce in a captive situation, so substitutions must be provided.

How would our kind-hearted lady go about obtaining hog chow, pelleted food and prickly pear for her captive?

These exotic foods are available for live-in use only at places such as the Adobe Mountain Wildlife Center, which is staffed by experts.

The best that our well-meaning but ignorant captor probably could have done is to offer the animal oatmeal mush and hamburger, and the "cute" little javelina would be dead in two weeks.

What is true about the specialized food needs of javelina is true in varying degrees of other wild animals native to the Sonoran desert.

At times, the captor of an immature wild bird or animal will try to salve his conscience by resolving to return the captive to its native habitat. Such a time might be when the animal regains its health, when it learns to shift for itself, when it becomes an adult or when it becomes unmanageable.

Granting their good faith, the rescuers must surely be aware that the survival rate for animals returned from domestic life to the

wild is practically zero.

Having been spoiled and softened by their lives as pets, the unhappy victims have developed none of the skills needed to successfully cope in the wild.

When they are returned to their former homes, they perish quickly.

Another compelling reason that wild creatures should be left strictly alone is the danger of contracting disease from them.

Here is a partial list of diseases which can be transferred from wild animals to man: rabies; psittacosis; leptospirosis; tularemia; histoplasmosis and avian tuberculosis.

Anybody wanting the grisly details about these revolting diseases can look them up in a medical dictionary.

The last reason for leaving them in the wild is the danger of imprinting.

Imprinting is the process by which young birds and some young animals learn to identify with whatever adult regularly brings them food.

If the adult is their own species, there's no problem, but if the food-bringer is a human being, the young creature will identify with that person rather than with its own species.

The unfortunate result, according to the Adobe Mountain Wildlife Center's manual on "Wildlife Care and Rehabilitation" is that, "When imprinting has occurred, an animal is no longer suitable for release to the wild; it will have little chance of survival and even less of becoming a part of the breeding process."

As a result of imprinting, food and sex will forever be associated in the animal's mind with human beings.

The widely-shown motion picture of imprinted ducks blindly following their imprinter, a man, around the edge of a duck pond provoked gales of laughter from viewers.

However, the plight of these warped, unnatural creatures cut off from their normal association with their own kind, is anything but funny.

So, when confronted with what looks like a wild animal emergency, it is generally wiser not to try to handle it yourself.

Call one of the animal help agencies listed in the phone book or phone the Arizona Humane Society.