

BABY SEASON
by Rei Ellison

I got the call. Well, a text, no one calls anymore. It was officially springtime, my calendar was clear, and we'd been experiencing days of gusty winds and cool temperatures. I was expecting the summons.

Spring signals baby season, and when winds blow, tiny squirrel kits are sometimes tossed out of their protective nests onto the distant, cruel ground. Predators are usually close at hand when that happens to ensure pain and loneliness are short-lived. But occasionally, a good Samaritan will find one or two cold and frightened young ones and bring them to the wildlife rescue center for expert care.

When I've been contacted, the kits will have spent time in a warm incubator, nestled in a cocoon of soft flannel. They have been fed many times a day with a nourishing formula developed especially for baby squirrels and stimulated to eliminate waste in the way that mom would have done.

Sometimes the littles are hairless, with their eyes closed and ears tucked tightly against their heads. These are the tough ones. They are so young and helpless, and their systems are still maturing. They can aspirate food no matter how carefully it was delivered, and it takes a skilled hand to clear airways and keep nourishment coming. Sometimes they don't make it.

But when they do and are stabilized to where they can live away from the protective womb of the incubator, I take them home. I am a squirrel foster, and my job is to get these little guys independent enough to be released back into their natural world. Life is still harsh on the outside, but it feels good to give them the chance that was stolen away during a cold windstorm.

The first order of business is to create a safe and comfortable den for the new arrivals. A good-sized dog carrier does the trick, and a lining of soft towels and scrunchy flannel blankets make a cozy nest. A heating pad under the cage radiates a little extra warmth. Oak branches covered in light green lichen, apple twigs sprouting a few rosy blossoms, and a prickly pinecone offer a glimpse of springtime habitat along with sensory stimulation for busy little paws. A hamster ladder and hammock are added for climbing practice, and the home is ready for the new fosters.

Once they are settled into their cozy new quarters, feeding and weighing the kits become the daily routine. Sweet formula powder is mixed and warmed three times a day and then sucked into small syringes with nipples like miniature baby bottles. Leather gloves protect the squirrels from my scent and guard my fingers against curious rodent teeth. But the gloves create a challenge to holding and feeding a fuzzy, wriggling creature that is beyond ecstatic about the proposition of a warm meal. A kitchen scale is a suitable means for gauging daily weight gain

but feeling the growing heft of a soft baby is also a fair indicator that the formula is doing its job.

It is also time to introduce solid squirrel food. Tasty walnuts, almonds, and acorns provide good practice in picking up, nibbling, and finally cracking nuts to reach the tasty morsels inside. Fruits and vegetables are added to the daily repast but create an ongoing challenge for notoriously picky eaters. While a sweet ripe strawberry might appear irresistible, it's that squishy brown banana destined for the green bin that is enjoyed with much gusto. The avocado turned to mush on the countertop becomes an epicurean delight in the eyes of a small rodent. Apples, pears, and spinach leaves are all good for a few bites, chews, and a little nutrition before being scattered around the den as if in a poor attempt at redecorating.

The weeks fly by, and my charges are teenagers. They are plump and soft with their tails spread proudly across their backs and, finally and thankfully, weaned. They are now so overactive and cranky that I am happy to return them to the rescue center, where staff will observe them for needed survival behaviors before release. When the time is right, they are freed into the neighborhoods where they were found to make their own way. Soon it will be summer, the days are warm, and the cycle of life continues. When I hear the chattering sounds of squirrels chasing one other through the trees, I know I will be ready to do it all over again next spring.