

Is This an Orphan Kitten?

Keeping the family together during kitten season

After reading this article, if you believe that you've found an orphaned kitten, please read our article "Raising Orphan Kittens" for care instructions.

March to November is kitten season, the time of the year when most kittens are born and shelters are busiest with incoming cats and kittens. Reports of people finding orphaned kittens increase during this time. If you've found an orphan kitten, preserving its health is a difficult job requiring prompt action. However, right up front, take a moment to decide if the kitten or litter you've located has truly been orphaned. Sometimes well-meaning people unknowingly separate kittens from their mother, making things worse instead of better. This article will help you determine if you're dealing with an orphan situation.

WHERE'S MOM?

The mother cat usually remains continuously with newborn kittens for one or two days after giving birth. She may then leave the 'nest' for short periods. Even well cared-for domestic mother cats with litters indoors may leave the nest for several hours at a time about two weeks after giving birth. Feral mothers, needing to hunt for food, will leave the nest for intervals at a much earlier stage.

Also, a mother cat will often pick up and move her litter to a new location, especially during the first few weeks after birth. Establishing a new nest is part of the cat's instinctual behavior to safeguard her young by not remaining in one place too long.

WHAT TO DO?

When you find small kittens without a mother cat present, the mother may simply be away hunting for food or may be moving the kittens, one-by-one, to or from the place you found them. In other words, don't immediately assume the kittens are orphans. If the kittens are safe for the time being, you should observe the nest to see that the mother returns soon and observe quietly from a safe distance if dealing with a shy or feral mother.

The goal here is to do what is best for the mother and her litter -- and it is best to keep a mother together with her kittens if possible, not for emotional reasons, but for the best chance of survival. Not only is hand-raising a young, "pre-wean" kitten an intensive round-the-clock job, but also the mortality rate for these young kittens separated from their mothers is much higher than if they had been kept together.

Remember that if you encounter a lone kitten, mom may be moving the kittens, and the lone kitten could be either the first to be moved to the new location, or the last to be moved from the old.

The same considerations apply to a lone mother cat. For instance, when trapping feral cats, if you trap a nursing mother you must try to find her kittens. In fact if you are trying to trap a feral litter and their mother, you can rely on the mother returning to the nest in order to trap her with her kittens, allowing you to keep the mother and kittens safely together.

In a home situation, kittens should not be taken from the mother until they are 8 to 10 weeks of age. However, kittens born to feral mothers should be taken away, if possible, at about 4 weeks old. At this age, it is easy to tame them and they have gotten 4 weeks' worth of the precious antibodies mother's milk provides. As they get older, it gets increasingly harder to tame them; kittens over the age of 8 weeks who have had no human contact will probably take months to tame...if it can be done at all.

When observing kittens you've found, there is no set length of time that you should wait to watch for a returning mother cat, but think in terms of only a few hours. If the kittens are clean, plump, and sleeping quietly in a heap, chances are that they've got an attentive mom and should be left alone. Abandoned kittens will often be dirty and the nest will be soiled, and they will cry continuously because they're hungry. It's a tough call, especially if you don't know how long the kittens have been alone when you discover them. If you wait too long, the kittens can weaken beyond recovery (chilling and dehydration are major concerns).

By all means, if you've found an orphaned litter we want you to be able to help these kittens reach a happy, healthy adulthood. But before acting, consider the information above and take a moment to ask yourself: **"Are these kittens orphans?"**