

by Valerie Sicignano, NYC Feral Cat Initiative

During high kitten season in the spring and summer, it's not unusual to discover a nest of unattended kittens or a single kitten seemingly abandoned by the mother. You want to help, right? Before jumping to the rescue, consider these recommendations.

First: Wait & Watch

You might have come across the kittens while their mother is off searching for food, or is in the process of moving them to a different location. Try to determine if the mother is coming back for them, or if they are truly orphaned.

To do this, stand far away from the kittens — 35 feet or more. If you stand too close, the mom will not approach her kittens. You might need to go away completely before the mother cat will return to attend to the kittens. It might be several hours before the mother cat returns — until she no longer senses the presence of humans hovering near her litter.

If you need to leave before the mother cat comes back, carefully evaluate whether the kittens are in immediate danger: Is it raining or snowing? Are dogs or wild animals that might harm the kittens running loose in the neighborhood? Does the neighborhood have kids or adults who are likely to harm the kittens? Are the kittens located in an area with heavy foot or car traffic?

To help with your decision, it is important to know that it might take several hours for the mother cat to return, and healthy kittens can survive this period without food as long as they are warm. Neonatal kittens are much more at risk of hypothermia than they are of starvation. During spring and summer months, waiting a longer time to see if mom will come back is much safer than during frigid winter months.

The mother cat offers her kittens' best chance for survival, so wait and watch as long as you can. The best food for the kittens is their mother's milk. Remove the kittens only if they are in immediate, grave danger.

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If the mother cat returns...

If mom returns and the area is relatively safe, leave the kittens alone with mom until they are weaned. You can offer a shelter and regular food to mom, but keep the food and shelter at a distance from each other. Mom will find the food but will not accept your shelter if the food is nearby, because she will not want to attract other cats to food located near her nest.

Six weeks is the optimal age to take the kittens from the mother for socialization and adoption placement, and any time after eight weeks for Trap-Neuter-Return (spay/neuter, vaccination, eartip, and return to their colony). Female cats can become pregnant with a new litter even while they are still nursing, so don't forget to get the mother cat spayed or you will have more kittens soon! Learn how to socialize kittens and how to successfully trap a mom and her kittens.

If the mother cat does not return...

If you discover that mom has been hit by a car, or if for any reason it appears that she is not coming back, then you should remove the kittens. This is crucial to the kittens' survival. But you must be prepared to see this project through to weaning if you decide to intervene!

If you take the kittens in, it is unlikely that you will find an organization with available staff or volunteers to take on bottle-feeding on short notice. Some organizations do have experienced bottle-feeders, but prior logistical planning is necessary. Animal shelters and veterinarians generally do not take in newborn kittens, since they do not have the staff to feed and stimulate them for elimination around-the-clock.