

Caring for orphaned Northern Palm Squirrel pups



Monday mornings are always busy at work—especially the Mondays after breaks like Diwali. This year, however, the cases were getting stalled due to a commotion at our OPD Shutter. A close look ascertained the cause to be a squirrel nest above the shutter. The nest was removed and the OPD started—but left three tiny sparsely haired squirrel pups in my hand. Their survival depended on reuniting with their mother. I kept a vigil for the squirrel mummy but she never showed up... That left me with the need to care for the pups which barely moved and lay curled up in a heap.

The squirrel pups were apparently healthy and they were put up in a cardboard box lined with cotton cloth. Pups this tiny with their eyes closed could die without their mother due to hypothermia or dehydration and need immediate fluids. A 3ml disposable syringe connected to a scalp vein tube, after cutting the tube half a centimetre away from the connector, served as a makeshift feeder. I fed 0.5ml rehydrating solution (Inj DNS) orally every two hours and put a 30ml plastic bottle filled with hot water under the cloth lining of the box to keep it warm.

The squirrel pups need to be stimulated for their bowel movements, which can be done by lightly rubbing the genitals with feather-light strokes of wet cotton, taking care to be very gentle. Soon the pups started urinating drop by drop and passed yellow-coloured stools.

After 12 hours of hydration, I started the pups on equal parts of pasteurized milk and water warmed together and fed it slowly drop by drop every two hours. My days started with the first feed at 5 AM and ended with the last feed at 11 PM. The pups needed to be held in my left hand using a soft clean cloth, which helped me hold the pups securely as they get so anxious and eager to feed that they move ahead and gulp the milk. We have to be very careful to let only a drop of milk fall at a time. Even if the pup is in a hurry, we need to hold back—otherwise, the pup will aspirate the milk and the milk will come out from its nostrils, which may cause lung infection. If this happens, put the pup's head down and wipe its nose and start again slowly.

It is very important to wipe the pup with moist cotton to keep them clean, as milk sticks to their skin, and also to make them urinate and defecate. Bloating was another major challenge that I faced—as squirrel milk is obviously different from cow or buffalo milk, the pups find it hard to digest the latter. Using 1–2 drops of human pediatric carminative drops containing digestive enzymes and probiotic powers like sporulac helped relieve gas and improve their digestion. Four to five days of meticulous caring bore fruits as their weight increased and short shiny fur appeared. After two weeks, their eyes opened and lower incisors erupted. I continued feeding the pups for three more weeks till they could eat soft nuts like cashews and peanuts.

The pups became increasingly rambunctious in their play and started moving about a lot, so I often took them outside to play in the garden. One fine day, all three scampered up a Neem Tree but never came back. I was poignant as I never got to say goodbye.

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