

Client education—**“Orphaned” Wildlife: *Baby Birds***

During the spring and summer months, a variety of baby birds and other young wildlife may be encountered. For many people, the pleasure of seeing these young creatures is mixed with a sense of protectiveness and a desire to help them survive. However finding a baby animal alone does not necessarily mean it is an orphan. Many wild parents leave their young alone during the day, sometimes for long periods, and the parents are often nearby.

People that work with wildlife have a term for a baby animal that is mistakenly believed to be an orphan: “Kidnap Victim”. Although this term is often used in a joking manner, the situation is far from funny. Well-meaning good Samaritans frequently describe scenarios in which the parent birds are scolding or screeching loudly as their young are taken away.

Returning a Baby Bird to the Nest

Young birds are sometimes blown out of the nest, or a sibling may even push them out. If you find an unfeathered or partially feathered baby bird that has fallen from the nest, place it back in the nest unless the bird appears sick or injured. If the entire nest has blown out of a tree, return the nest and babies to the tree.



Watch from a distance to insure the parent birds return or check for fresh droppings in the nest as a sign that the baby bird is being fed. (Parents will remove fresh droppings from the very nest of very young birds). Parent birds do not reject their young just because they have been handled by humans.

When the Nest Has Been Destroyed

Sometimes nests are blown down by windstorms or destroyed by predators. Sometimes the nest is too high or the tree has been cut down.

A makeshift nest may be manufactured with a berry basket or plastic butter tub. Punch drainage holes in the bottom of plastic tubs. If the nest can be salvaged, place it within the plastic container. If the nest is gone, line the container with soft, dry paper towels. Do NOT use fresh grass because the moisture will chill the babies. Wire the makeshift nest as close to the original nest location as possible. The nest may also be placed on a nearby branch or within a nearby tree or bush. Make sure the nest is out of direct sunlight. If it is not possible to wire the make-shift nest, place the nest within a hanging plant potter.

Leave the area and watch from a distance to insure the parent birds return. The parents may be wary of the new nest at first, but once the young starts to beg for food, the parents will land to feed them. Parent birds do not reject their young after humans have handled them.

Fledglings

If you find a fully feathered baby songbird with evidence of tail feathers hopping around the yard, it is probably not injured, even if it doesn't appear to be flying well. This is a "fledgling" or adolescent bird. A fledgling may be distinguished from an injured bird, because a bird with a wing injury will hold the affected wing lower than the good wing. Even though fledglings may be as large as the parent birds, fledglings are actually still growing. They can hop and maybe even fly a little bit, but they still need time to develop their survival skills.



Fledgling is a critical developmental period during which the young bird learns how to fly, forage for food, and avoid predators by observing its parents. Fledging is, by definition, a dangerous but necessary period in the baby bird's life. Concerned citizens can best help these young birds by keeping dogs, cats, and curious children out of the area. It generally takes anywhere from 5 to 15 days for the fledgling bird to learn to fly well.

Fledglings should NOT be put back into the nest—they will only keep jumping out and may eventually harm themselves. Unless injured or ill, fledglings should merely be returned to the area they were found so their parents can continue to feed them.

When Does a Baby Bird Need Medical Attention?

A baby bird should only be removed from its parents if:

- ...it is sick or injured.
- ...you know for a fact that the parent birds are dead.
- ...there is absolutely no way to return the baby to its nest.

Just like family pets, wild birds require professional care when they are sick or injured. If you find a sick or injured wildlife, contact a local wildlife rehabilitator for help as soon as possible [See Finding a Wildlife Rehabilitator at <http://www.nrawildlife.org/page.asp?ID=214>]. If a dog, or particularly a cat presents a wild animal to you, a professional should probably evaluate the baby even if it does not appear to be injured since the bacteria in cat mouths can quickly prove lethal.

Transporting Injured Wildlife

Use a towel or pillowcase to cover the animal, and then scoop it up gently. The best way to contain and transport most injured wildlife is in a cardboard box with a lid. Punch a few air holes in the tops and sides and place a towel or paper towels on the bottom. Small birds may be safely transported in a paper bag with ventilation holes. Pet carriers may be used for larger animals.

Place the container in a warm, dark, quiet place away from pets, children, and noise until you can transport the animal. This will reduce additional stress and prevent further injury. While in the car, keep the carrier out of the sun and away from direct air conditioning. Keep the car radio off and keep talking to a minimum.

If you are unable to transport the bird immediately, then contact a local wildlife rehabilitator to determine the animal's condition and what, if any, food would be appropriate. Do not handle the animal, or look at it any more than is absolutely necessary.

Birds of Prey

Some species of owls, especially Great Horned owls (*Bubo virginianus*), will leave the nest when they are only about half-grown. These fledgling owls can walk and climb but are not yet flighted. The parents continue to feed and care for their young well into the fall.

If you find an owl chick that is on the ground, do not assume that it needs help. If it is standing, alert, and has some feathers, the parents are probably nearby. If possible, keep people and pets away from this area and check on the owlet the next day. If it has not moved then something may be wrong. Any young bird that is not alert, has flies on it, or cannot stand or walk also requires help.



There are special considerations involved when transporting a bird of prey since their sharp talons can cause severe injury. If possible, approach raptors from the rear. While wearing thick leather gloves use a thick blanket to herd the animal into a cardboard box set on its side. If you must handle or move a bird of prey, anticipate that the bird will struggle when you attempt to move it. Use a blanket, towel, or jacket to cover the entire bird (including its eyes) and lift it while pinning down its wings against its body.

Conclusion

A young bird's best chance of survival is always with its parents. If you see a wild animal that appears to be sick or injured, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator immediately for advice. Many young animals that appear to be orphaned are not.

*It is illegal in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Europe to possess native wildlife without a license.

Further Reading

American Bird Conservancy. Cats Indoors: The Campaign for Safer Birds & Cats
<http://www.abcbirds.org/cats/>

Humane Society of the United States. Found an Injured or Orphaned Animal?
http://www.hsus.org/wildlife/urban_wildlife_our_wild_neighbors/coexisting/injured_orphaned_wildlife.html

Messinger Woods Wildlife Care and Education Center. Help...I Found a Baby Bird.
<http://www.webbedworks.com/messingerwoods/babybirds.htm>

Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research. <http://www.tristatebird.org/clinic/help>