

Baby Birds Out of the Nest

Sooner or later, no matter where you live, you'll come across a baby bird on the ground. You'll have to decide whether you should rescue it or leave it to fend for itself. In most cases, it is best not to interfere. The natural parents do a much better job at raising their young than we could ever do. A baby bird that is featherless must be fed every 15 to 20 minutes from about sunrise to 10 p.m.! This obviously requires a large time commitment on the part of the foster parent.

Finding fully feathered birds: If the bird is fully or partially feathered, chances are it doesn't need your help. As young birds develop they soon outgrow the limited space of a nest. The young birds, referred to as "fledglings" or "branchers" at this stage, typically leave the nest and move about on the ground and on low branches for a few days before they can fly (Fig. 1). Their parents are nearby and continue to care for the birds, answering their demanding calls with regular deliveries of food. The scolding calls coming from the nearby tree are likely the adult birds, voicing their disapproval while they wait for you to leave.

Unless injured, the fledgling bird should be left where it is. Efforts should be made to keep cats, dogs, and curious children away from the bird so the mother can continue to feed it.

Unfortunately, this is when people often interfere and take a healthy bird out of the wild. Not only is this illegal (except in the case of starlings, house sparrows, and domestic pigeons), but it also deprives the growing bird of essential care it needs from its parents.

Finding naked birds or birds with beginning feathers: If you find an uninjured nestling that has fallen or been pushed out of its nest, replace it in the nest (Fig. 2). (Note that this behavior is actually adaptive for some species. This way, only the strongest of the brood survive and go on to raise young themselves.) If the nest has fallen down (common after windstorms), replace the nest in a tree with the baby bird(s) in it. (It is **not true** that birds abandon their chicks if a person touches them. Birds have a poor sense of smell.)

If you can't find the nest or accessing it is too dangerous, put the baby bird where its parents can find it but where it will be safe from cats. Use a small plastic berry basket, margarine tub, or similar container lined with shredded paper towels (no cotton products, which tend to tangle up in birds' feet). With a nail or wire, fasten the makeshift nest to a shady spot in a tree or tall shrub near where the bird was found. Next, place the nestling inside, tucking the feet underneath the body.



Figure 1. Young birds, such as the robins shown here are referred to as "fledglings" or "branchers," and typically leave the nest and move about on the ground and on low branches for a few days before they can fly.

(Drawing by Elva Hamerstrom Paulson.)



Figure 2. If you find an uninjured nestling that has fallen or been pushed out of its nest, replace it in the nest. It is not true that birds abandon their chicks if a person touches them. Birds have a poor sense of smell.

(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.)

The parents will usually come back in a short time and will feed the babies in the container just as if it were the original nest. (Often, you will see the mother going back and forth between each "nest," feeding both sets of babies.)

Times when you should consider quickly getting the bird to a wildlife rehabilitator: (1) If the parents don't find the new nest within two hours, or if you are certain that

the mother of a baby bird is dead; (2) if the bird is hurt or sick (unable to flutter wings, bleeding, wings drooping unevenly, weak or shivering), or the bird was attacked by cat or dog, call a wildlife rehabilitator immediately. The longer the delay, the less chance the bird has of surviving. Your local wildlife office keeps a list of rehabilitators and can tell you which ones serve your area, or you can look under “Animals” or “Wildlife” in your phone directory. If a rehabilitator isn’t available, follow the menu options over the phone or on the group’s Web site for information on what to do. (See the WDFW handout “Wildlife Rehabilitators and Wildlife Rehabilitation” for additional information. WDFW website: <http://www.dfw.wa.gov/wlm/living/rehab.htm>)

While waiting for a rehabilitator to arrive, pick the bird up with your gloved hands and place it in a well-ventilated, covered box or paper bag that is padded with paper towels.

Keep the baby bird warm and in a quiet, dark place until it can be picked up by a wildlife rehabilitator. If the bird is cold, put one end of the bird’s container on a heating pad set on low. Or, fill a zip-top plastic bag, plastic soft-drink container with a screw lid, or a rubber glove with hot water. Wrap the warm container with cloth, and put it next to the animal. Make sure the container doesn’t leak, or the animal will get wet and chilled.

Do not give the baby bird any liquids (they get all they need from their food and very often will inhale any liquid).

Wash your hands after contact with the bird. Wash anything the bird was in contact with—towel, jacket, blanket, pet carrier—to prevent the spread of diseases and/or parasites to you or your pets.

Adapted from “Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest” (see <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living.htm>)

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