

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.

Returning a Baby Bird to the Nest

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. Parent birds do not reject their young just because they have been handled by humans.

When the Nest Has Been Destroyed

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. Make sure the nest is out of direct sunlight. If it is not possible to wire the make-shift nest, use a hanging plant potter.

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. 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 a dangerous but necessary period in the baby bird's life.

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.

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.

When Does a Baby Bird Need Medical Attention?

A baby bird should only be removed from its parents if it is sick or injured, if the parent birds are dead, or if there is no way to return the baby to its nest. 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.nwrawildlife.org/page.asp?ID=214>]. If a dog, or particularly a cat presents a wild animal to you, a professional should probably evaluate the bird 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, then scoop it up gently. The best way to contain and transport most injured wildlife is in a cardboard box with a lid. Punch 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, while a pet carrier may be used for larger animals.

Place the container in a warm, dark, quiet place until you can transport the animal. While in the car, keep the carrier out of the sun and away from direct air conditioning. Keep the radio off and keep talking to a minimum. This will reduce additional stress and prevent further injury. If you are unable to transport the bird immediately, then contact a local wildlife rehabilitator to discuss the bird'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.

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>