



Care of Displaced Young Songbirds

Three-fifths of all living birds are songbirds. They range in size from the largest of ravens to the smallest of warblers. Young songbirds are commonly found on their own outside a nest, often appearing that they are orphaned. Some are truly in need of help, while others are simply beginning to learn how to live on their own in the wild and are best left alone.

VOLUNTEERS FOR WILDLIFE

Wildlife Hospital &
Rehabilitation Center
Education Department
27 Lloyd Harbor Road,
Huntington, NY 11743

Phone: 631-423-0982

Fax: 631-423-0985

Email:

volunteersforwildlife@gmail.com

The Basics

Songbirds are born blind, naked, and helpless, and for several weeks after hatching, cannot fend for themselves. Birds that are born entirely dependent on their parents are called *altricial* birds. Nestlings birds are fed by their parents throughout the daylight hours.



They grow and develop until they leave the nest at ten days to two weeks of age. At this point, they are well-feathered but with a limited ability to fly. Birds at this stage are called *fledglings*. They follow their parents about, learning to forage for food and to avoid predators. Some species of songbirds become completely independent of their parents by two to three weeks. Others may be dependent for a full season. Fledgling birds are commonly found alone and may be mistaken for orphans; however, parents are typically close by, watching their young from a safe distance. Typically, both the male and female parents care for the young, so it is uncommon to find a bird that has lost both parents and is truly orphaned. The idea that human handling causes a bird to reject its young is a myth. An adult bird's instinct to care for its young is very strong, and he or she will overcome great odds to raise their offspring to adulthood.

Help! I've Found a Baby Bird!

Sometimes, altricial birds fall out of their nest. If that happens, the best thing to do is put the baby back into its nest. If you are unable to reach the nest, that's OK! You can make a makeshift nest out of a berry basket or a small box with holes poked in the bottom for drainage. Just line the box with paper towels (grass or leaves in the nest is not a good idea because they can retain moisture, which can chill the babies). Then, take wire or twist ties and fasten the basket (now a makeshift nest) to a branch in the tree. Place the displaced bird into the new nest and stay away from the area, allowing the parents to return and care for the bird.



Please note:

1. Touching a baby bird to put it back into a nest will **NOT** cause the parent to reject or abandon it.
2. In most instances, both parents care for their young. If you find a dead adult bird that you think had been caring for a nest, it is likely that the remaining parent will continue the role in caring for its young.

If after 24 hours, a parent has not returned to care for the bird, or if the baby is cold and limp, it will need to be brought to a wildlife rehabilitator. Keep it in a quiet place, inside a cardboard box with holes punched in for drainage, in a quiet place. Place the box partially on top of a heating pad, set on low, so that the animal has the opportunity to move to the part of the box not on heat if so desired. If you do not have a heating pad, you can fill a rubber glove or plastic bottle with warm water and place it in the box. Be sure to get the animal to help before the water gets cold.

Nestling vs. Fledgling

In late spring and throughout the summer, Volunteers for Wildlife receives a tremendous amount of calls about birds that are found on the ground, unable to fly. We hope that this article will give you some clarification of what actually needs rescuing.

Nestlings are birds that should still be in a nest. They may be either completely naked, with eyes closed (technically called hatchlings), or may have some feathers. Sometimes, you will see feathers encased in a shaft with feathers poking out of the end. Birds this age should be returned to the nest or placed in a makeshift nest. After a certain amount of time (9–16 days, depending on species), baby birds leave the nest. This is a normal part of their development and must be respected. They spend a few days (up to a week) on the ground, learning how to forage and how to fly. Though you might not see them, their parents are nearby watching and helping them grow. It is imperative that you leave these babies where they are. We understand this is hard! There are predators in the area, and other dangers. However, the only way these babies can learn how to deal with these situations is from their parents. Removing them from the situation only puts them in harm's way when they are released, as they will never have learned what dangers to fear and how to escape.

Placing fledgling birds back into a nest is futile; they will only jump out again. A nest is not a home; it is more like a crib. One purpose in leaving the nest is to avoid predation, as predators (cats, raccoons) can find babies in the trees, as well as on the ground. Well-meaning people take these adolescent birds by mistake. If you want to help, keep people and pets away from the area while these youngsters learn how to fly.

Photos of Young Bird Development

The bird shown below is a hatchling, it is only a day old. Its body is mostly naked, with just a few downy feathers on its back. Sizes of hatchling birds vary with species, but all hatchling altricial birds will appear featherless and with their eyes closed.



The next photo shows a nestling bird. Feathers are beginning to grow in, but a good deal of pink skin is still visible. The bird's eyes are just beginning to open.



The final photo shows a fledgling bird. Fledglings look very much like adult birds, but typically have shorter tail feathers, as they are still growing. They will often seem “friendly” and unafraid of humans, but this is only because they are young. At this stage, they are still learning from their parents that they must fear predators and other potential threats such as humans.



A Note About Keeping Wild Birds as Pets

Volunteers for Wildlife receives many inquiries regarding people who would like to raise a young bird themselves at home, and/or keep it as a pet.



Please be advised that it is not in the best interests of the bird (or yourself) to do this. Young birds grow rapidly, and they have very specific nutritional needs at each stage of their lives. Consequently, even a short period of time during which they are not being given the proper food can be disastrous to their health and development. Bone deformities, poor feather growth, or death may result from a poor diet. There is no commercially available formula that is appropriate for all species of wild birds! Do not be fooled by what pet store employees may tell you, or what package labels claim (they're just trying to sell you something!). Wildlife rehabilitators have the training and resources that allow them to provide the best nutrition to young birds at every stage of their lives, to ensure they will grow up into healthy adults.

Legalities

It is illegal to keep a wild bird in captivity as a pet without the proper state and/or federal permitting. If you have been caring for a wild bird and need to return it to the wild, please contact a wildlife rehabilitator for assistance. In New York State, wild migratory birds are protected by Environmental Conservation law (article 11, title 5, section 11-0511). Migratory birds are further protected by federal law. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibits possession of wild birds, and also disallows harm to wild bird nests and eggs, among other things. Misdemeanors are punishable by fines of up to \$15,000.

Quick Facts

Songbirds are born naked, blind and helpless, and are completely dependent on their parents. But within 2-3 weeks, they will have grown and developed enough to begin flying and finding food on their own.

A baby songbird's fast rate of growth is largely due to the fact that it is fed about once every 30 minutes by its parents throughout the daylight hours.

Touching a baby bird in order to put back into a nest will **NOT** cause the parent to reject or abandon it.

A plastic berry basket can be used as a makeshift nest; the parents will still recognize their baby and return to care for it.

Young birds that have left the nest and are just learning to fly are called *fledglings*. These "teenager" birds are still being watched and fed by their parents, although they no longer stay in a nest. They are often found and mistaken for orphans.

Young birds learn to fear predators and other dangers by taking cues from their parents. There is no way to replicate this type of learning in captivity, so it is always best to reunite a lost baby bird with its parents. A wild bird should only be raised in captivity as a last resort.



About Volunteers for Wildlife

Volunteers For Wildlife is a non-profit, volunteer organization, founded in 1982 and dedicated to preserving Long Island, New York's wildlife and natural habitats. We operate a Wildlife Hospital and Education Center at Caumsett State Historic Park in Huntington, NY. We accept and rehabilitate sick, injured, and displaced young wildlife. Our Wildlife Advisory telephone and email services assist the general public in need of information and help with distressed wild animals. Last year, we received over 3,000 requests for help.

We have wildlife education programs for Long Island schoolchildren and adults. The participation of our permanently non-releasable birds, animals, and reptiles make these programs an exciting way to learn about Long Island's wildlife.

Volunteers for Wildlife has members all over Long Island and the New York area. We have a network of cooperating veterinarians, who provide initial emergency care to injured and displaced wildlife, and independent licensed wildlife rehabilitators throughout the New York area.

For more information on our organization and contributing your time or making a donation to our cause, visit our website: www.volunteersforwildlife.org.

Baby songbirds are brought to our hospital throughout the year. Many are orphans, others are injured after being hit by a car or caught by a cat. The average cost of care for a young songbird in our hospital is \$40, and many are left without a donation to support our efforts. You can contribute to the care of any animal in our hospital through our "Help Our Wildlife" program, and animal sponsorships make a great gift! For more information, visit our website, email, or call us at (631) 423-0982.