



How to Help Baby Birds



Published as a service to Florida's wildlife by

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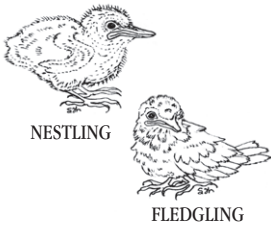
April, May, June and July are the busiest months at SOS. Baby bird admissions double and even triple the work of our staff and volunteers. Calls about baby birds also keep the phone busy, so have this information handy — you or someone you know may need it soon.



Parent birds care for their young from the time they hatch until they can care for themselves. Usually this is done in quiet, safe surroundings that the parents have chosen for nesting. In places with dense human populations, like the Tampa Bay area, many birds have adapted to living in close proximity to people. As a result, face-to-face encounters with this springtime population boom have become increasingly common. The following information will help you provide the best chance of survival for a baby bird you may find.

Any injured bird needs immediate medical attention. As with human accidents, prompt treatment can be the key to survival. Do not attempt to feed an injured bird. Confine the bird; keep it warm and quiet; and transport it to SOS or the nearest permitted rehabilitator as quickly as possible.

SONGBIRDS



Should you find an uninjured baby bird, first determine if it is a nestling or a fledgling. Nestlings are very young baby birds. A nestling songbird will have no feathers when it hatches. As it grows, it will start to get body feathers and short wing and tail feathers. Nestlings are helpless and need their parents for food, warmth, and protection.

Fledglings are slightly older baby birds. They are fully feathered and are able to perch, hop, and fly short distances. They have left the nest on their own even though they cannot completely care for themselves. During this important period of a bird's life (usually about two weeks), the parents teach the fledgling what to eat and where to find it, how to recognize and avoid predators, and how to communicate with other birds. Fledglings also use this time to exercise and strengthen their flight muscles, learning to fly from the ground up.

If you find a baby songbird **DO NOT ASSUME IT IS AN ORPHAN**. The chances of both parents abandoning the youngster are very low. In fact, at least one parent is likely to be nearby—watching its baby AND YOU.

NESTLINGS BELONG IN THE NEST

Try to locate the nearby nest and return the baby to its family. A call to SOS can provide some tips on where to look for the nests of different species. If the nest has been destroyed or is impossible to reach, or if you cannot find it even after a thorough search, you can provide a substitute nest. For birds like mourning doves, blue jays, and mockingbirds, use a plastic berry basket, margarine tub, or small hanging basket. Make sure there are holes in the bottom so that rainwater can drain. Line the container with dry leaves and grass and small twigs.



Avoid using paper products or other manmade materials (towels, cotton, etc.) which absorb moisture and can entangle delicate nestlings. Fill the nest to one inch from the top and indent the center to hold the baby bird. Place the substitute nest as close as possible to the original. Woodpeckers and flickers nest in cavities dug in dead or softwood trees. Appropriately sized hollow logs can be substituted if the section of the tree containing the nesthole is not usable.

Always handle nestlings carefully, but don't be afraid to touch them. Most birds have a poorly developed sense of smell, so your "scent" will not cause the parents to abandon the little one.

Next, leave the area and watch from a distance. Be discreet — even indoors you will prevent the parents from returning if you stand in plain sight of the window or glass doors. Within an hour or two, the nestling's hunger calls should bring the parents back to feed their offspring. Be aware that the parents will make frequent visits to the baby but will not stay with it constantly. They have other babies to care for, too!

FLEDGLING FROM THE GROUND UP



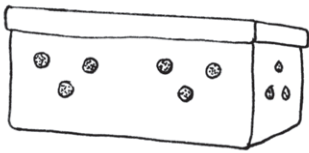
Part of a fledgling's survival training is to sit perfectly still. Its best defense at this age is to go unnoticed. If the bird is in a safe place **LEAVE IT ALONE.**

In other situations, put the bird in a nearby bush or tree. Use whatever cover is available. Again, watch the bird from a distance. A fledgling can be left for 3-4 hours in a safe spot. If the bird is still in the same place after that time, intervention is often necessary. Call a rehabilitation center if you are in doubt at this point.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

On occasion, attempts to return a baby bird to its parents may be unsuccessful. These birds need professional care from someone with the proper state and federal permits to keep wildlife until release is possible. Transport nestlings in a small box lined with tissue. Older birds travel well in a larger box lined with paper towels. Keep the baby warm, but out of direct sunlight. Also keep it away from people and other animals.

If you can't transport the bird immediately, a temporary diet can be used for most songbirds. Mix one hard cooked egg yolk with 1/3 can of Ken-L-Ration dog food. When the bird opens its mouth, place a small piece of food in the back, above the tongue, using a new child's watercolor brush or the blunt end of a flat toothpick. Wait for the baby to swallow before giving it more. This is an emergency diet only. Serious nutritional deficiencies will result if it is used longer.



Never pry a bird's beak open. A growing bird's jaw can be easily damaged this way. Putting water in a bird's mouth is another no-no. Most babies get enough fluid from their food. Last, don't give the bird bread or milk — it can't digest it.

Baby doves must be tube fed using special equipment. Because of the technique involved we recommend that you wait for a rehabilitator to feed the bird. Baby doves can go several hours between feedings.

CAPTIVE-REARED vs. NATURE'S WAY

Wild birds are difficult to care for unless you are a parent bird. Taking over a parent bird's responsibilities ranges from the time-consuming to the impossible. An experienced, knowledgeable rehabilitator can lessen the disadvantages of being "hand-raised" but can never eliminate them. It takes less time to take the bird to a wildlife rehabilitator than to try to raise the bird yourself.

A baby bird's diet and feeding schedule are determined by its species and age. Feedings start just after daybreak and continue through dusk seven days a week. The average time until release is 4-6 weeks. This means that birds grow very rapidly. An inadequate diet, for even a few days, will lead to serious problems in bone and feather development, which prolong captivity and may make release impossible.

Housing requirements are similarly customized: the size of the nest box, cage, or aviary; the temperature and humidity; the substitute nest (if any); and the type of perches and bathing accommodations all depend on the bird's age and species. Care must be taken so that materials used for the cage and in it do not harm the bird or damage feathers. A quiet, natural setting is preferable.

Equally important but usually overlooked are a young bird's survival skills. In nature, continuing care from parents softens the transition from the sheltered life of the nest to the outer world. Yes, birds have instincts; but the boundary between innate behavior and learned behavior is not sharp. Instincts must be perfected by some type of learning process so that youngsters can adapt them to the world.



For instance, nestlings start to acquire necessary social skills by first learning to recognize individuals through interaction with parents and siblings. In some species, learning the social hierarchy of a large group is essential. Most true songbirds also learn their songs from their fathers.

The development of feeding habits is influenced by where the youngsters are led and what they are given by their parents. Like human babies, they must learn to eat nutritious foods that they might otherwise avoid. They must also find out what not to eat, like poisonous berries and insects. Simply watching the parent is invaluable to the fledgling, especially in species that can learn by imitation.

Imitating a parent is also a primary means of learning about danger. Baby birds begin life with few fears. Soon they become afraid of almost anything new. During this time, if a parent is indifferent to something, the youngster will see that it is safe. On the other hand, if Mom or Dad freezes and becomes silent, the young bird learns to recognize danger and how to avoid detection. As the bird gets older it will learn its species' alarm call this way too.

Many birds — blue jays, mocking-birds, and grackles for example — aggressively defend their nests and offspring against potential predators. They can often be seen “dive-bombing,” or in larger numbers mobbing, cats, dogs, squirrels, snakes, other birds, and even people. Only parent birds can teach this defense.

The ultimate goal in raising a wild bird is for the bird to be returned to the wild, where it can reproduce. A bird that dies a few weeks after release, from starvation or a predator attack, is not a successful release. Rehabilitators know how to minimize human contact and best simulate a growing bird's daily requirements. They can also provide adult birds of the same species to act as role models, as well as other youngsters with which the baby can interact. Wild birds must remain wild to survive!

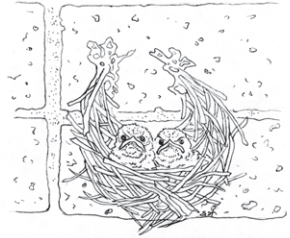
OTHER KINDS OF BIRDS

Now and then people may come across a baby that is not a songbird. In some instances these birds can be returned to the nest. Because of possible danger to the rescuer, other birds in the nest, or birds in nearby nests, this should be left to experienced individuals. Sometimes the risk of disturbing other nests in the area makes it unwise to return the baby. If you find a baby that isn't a songbird, promptly contact a wildlife professional.

CHIMNEY SWIFTS

Chimney swifts are more closely associated with people than other species because they have come to depend on human shelters for nest sites. Sharing your chimney with swifts can be an interesting experience. And remember, swifts eat a lot of insects! Here is some advice that may make living with swifts more fun:

- Swift nests pose no fire hazard if the chimney is cleaned annually or biannually as recommended for fire safety. Schedule cleaning for late September or October to avoid harming the birds. The chimney can also be capped at this time if you don't want the swifts to return next year.
- Nest debris and chattering noise can be reduced or eliminated if the flue is kept closed. Covering your fireplace before nesting season begins may also help.
- Don't mistake swifts for bats which are active at night. Contact Cindy (398-3027) or Sarah (535-2410) at The Florida Bat Center if you have any questions concerning bats.
- Chimney swifts are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Federal and state permits are required before the birds or their nests can be removed, even if they become a nuisance.
- Call SOS if you need any additional help with swifts.



OTHER WAYS TO HELP... Environmentalism Begins in the Backyard

We've all heard the phrase "Think globally, act locally." Why not start in your own yard? Many of the critical problems faced by wildlife are intensified during the breeding season. But habitat loss isn't always large-scale deforestation or wetlands draining. Do your trees really need to be trimmed during nesting season? Try to have this kind of yard maintenance finished by the end of March, before most songbirds begin nest building.

If you have to trim later in the spring, always check for nests or watch for adults making frequent trips to the tree. Very often the birds will continue their parental care if the nest is carefully moved to a suitable location close by. Don't forget to look for the cavity nests of woodpeckers and screech owls too!

Pesticide poisoning is another serious threat to wildlife, especially in Florida. Insects become more active as the weather gets warmer—about the same time many birds begin breeding. This is nature's way of assuring an abundant food supply for the baby birds.

Unfortunately, most humans fail to appreciate nature's design. The resulting increase in yard spraying can have dire consequences. Birds do not have to come in direct contact with the chemicals to suffer their effects. Eating insects from a treated yard causes a build-up of either the poison or the effects of the poison, depending on the chemical used.

When a parent bird eats enough insects to have symptoms of poisoning, it can no longer incubate eggs or feed young. If the babies have been fed the same insects, they too are poisoned. If you must spray, spray only when there is an actual problem and always follow the manufacturer's directions when doing the work yourself (more is not better!).

Still one more human intrusion for wildlife to cope with is the outdoor house cat. A significant number of the songbirds, adults and youngsters, brought to wildlife rehabilitators in the spring and summer are victims of cat attacks. Although it is natural for a cat to hunt, cats are not natural predators of wild birds. They are domestic animals introduced by humans. All injuries from cats are serious; even feather loss can cause problems. You can see how important it is to take responsibility for your cat:

- Keep pet cats indoors (the cat will be safer too!).
- If you can't confine your cat, allow it outdoors only after dark.
- Put a breakaway collar on your cat and attach a bell to warn birds.

Much information has been published concerning what to do if you find a baby bird. Hopefully the bird behavior discussed here will help you use this information wisely, to give all baby birds the best possible start in life.

As mentioned earlier, many species have learned to live near humans. Other species have not adapted as well and their populations have declined. How many meadowlarks have you seen in Sarasota, Pinellas or Hillsborough County lately? So even if blue jays and mockingbirds (or squirrels and opossums) seem common to you, know that they are very important—because they are the wildlife most likely to still be here in 10 or 20 years. Let's all do our part to make sure that doesn't change.

Illustrated by Sandra Williams

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For Pinellas Seabird Rehabilitation Center

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