

Rescuing Adult Songbirds

By Sharon St. Joan

First, is it a baby or an adult?

If you have found a songbird, and it appears to be a baby, please see the resource “Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 1.”

Even if a songbird you have found appears to be an adult, it’s possible that the bird is in fact a fledgling. During the spring, summer, and early fall months, many young songbirds that are just leaving the nest for the first time are found by people. If a songbird you have found during these months appears healthy but is not flying, please see “Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 1” for information on what to do and what not to do.



Second, to rescue or not to rescue?

Any songbird you find on the ground who is an adult, rather than a fledgling, and who does not immediately fly away from you is in need of help. The bird is either sick or injured and must be taken right away to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. For help in locating a licensed wildlife rehabilitator near you, please see “How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator.”

Important: For the bird to have the best chance of recovery and release, you must contact a rehabilitator right away and transport the songbird there immediately.

If you have determined that an adult songbird needs rescuing, follow the instructions below for catching and transporting the bird to a wildlife rehabilitator.

How do I catch an adult songbird?

There are a great many different situations in which you may find an injured bird. Here’s what to do in these situations:

- If the bird is in the mouth of a dog or cat or caught in a fence, extricate the bird as carefully and quickly as you can. Try to maintain your hold on the bird so that he does not fly away, only to die later of his injuries.
- If the bird is on the ground, unable to fly, approach the bird from behind quietly and slowly, then reach down quickly and precisely, and without hesitating, put your hand around the bird’s shoulders, holding the wings folded against the body, and pick the bird up. If this does not work in the daytime, try again in the early evening, when it is almost dark.
- If the bird is able to run, walk, or hop, try to maneuver him into a corner or against a wall, so that you can pick him up, or ask one or two other people to help you. A bird net may help.
- If the bird can fly a little, you may be able to catch her after dark, or by maneuvering her into a corner. Again, a bird net may help. If the bird can fly well, you may be able to catch her the next day, when she may be weaker from her injuries.

- If the bird is flying well, but has an injury that you can see, or perhaps has string wrapped around his feet, it may not be possible to catch the bird. Do not get into a situation in which you are chasing the bird with no possibility of catching him. That will accomplish nothing, and the bird may die of stress.

In some cases, especially with a bird who lives in your yard, you may be able to set out seed on the ground, leading to a pet carrier, and, over a number of days, the bird may go into the carrier, and you may be able to shut the door. However, this method is unsafe for many songbirds because you may trap, and even injure, other birds, and the one who is injured may further injure himself. This method works best with injured pigeons, doves, and some other ground feeders.

This information is meant for use only with injured or ill adult songbirds. There is no reason, and it is also illegal, to catch an adult bird who is not injured or ill. It is legal to take a native wild bird directly to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, but not legal to possess such a bird otherwise.

How should I hold and observe an adult songbird?

Once you have the bird in hand, do not let her go; keep a firm (but not tight) hold on the bird. Don't ever pick up a songbird by a wing, or by both wings, by the head, or by one or both legs – only by the body.

Support the body of the bird and the bird's feet with one hand. (The feet should not be dangling, but should be just underneath the body of the bird, in the palm of your hand.) If the bird fits easily in the palm of your hand, then place your other hand over the top of the bird and hold the bird securely in both your hands. Don't leave spaces between your hands that the bird may wiggle through.

If the bird is bigger than the palm of your hand (a pigeon, for example), then hold the bird in one hand, as described above, and put your other hand around the shoulders of both wings of the bird, so that the wings are held folded in their normal, at-rest position against the body of the bird.

Here are some things to be aware of as you handle the bird:

- Be aware that the bird is very frightened. She is injured; she is in an unfamiliar situation; she is being separated from her mate or her flock; and she is being held by a large predator – you. (She is not aware of your good intentions.)
- The bird may be extremely still, but that does not mean that the bird is calm. Birds adopt this still state when they feel their lives are threatened; it is a defense against being noticed by predators.
- Injured adult songbirds may very easily die of stress. Do not hold the bird longer than you need to. Don't stare at her, try to examine her, or attempt to assess her injuries. Handle her as little as possible – she will be frightened, not comforted, by being “petted.”

Take the bird inside into a secure room, one where the door can be closed, and where there are no animals or children. It is best if the room has little furniture because if the bird gets away from you, she may slip into a container or behind a piece of furniture and be hard to recover. A bathroom is often a good room to take the bird into; you can also put a towel under the bathroom door to block off the inch or two of ventilation space.

If the bird may be able to fly, it's best to cover the windows, until you have the bird inside

a box. Otherwise, the bird might get away from you and injure himself by flying into the window.

How do I prepare a place for the bird?

Before you contact a rehabilitator, you'll need to prepare a place for the bird. Find a cardboard box that has a top and is not torn. For most songbirds, a shoebox is a good size. Put a cloth (not terry cloth) inside on the bottom; a tea towel, a t-shirt, or even a couple of paper towels will do fine. You don't want to use terry cloth (the fabric most towels are made of) because the bird could catch his beak or toes on the loops.

Then, make a nest that fits the bird. On top of the towel that has been placed on the bottom of the box, roll a second small towel (this needs to be a cloth one, but not terry cloth) into a doughnut shape. Place the bird lying down (if he will lie down) inside the "nest." If he doesn't stay there, that's okay. Although adult birds do not use nests except when they have babies, an injured adult bird may need one.

Put several small air holes, each about the diameter of a pencil, in the top of the cardboard box. (More small air holes are better than a few big air holes.) Then, with the bird in the box, tape the top to the bottom of the box. Usually, one or two pieces of tape will do. However, if the bird is very small and very lively and could slip out between the top and bottom of the box, that's a problem you'll need to resolve – with more tape or a different box.

When placing the bird inside the box, be very careful that he does not fly away. This can happen very easily, and he can re-injure himself that way. Do not assume that the bird cannot fly; he may regain his ability to fly unexpectedly.

If you have a heating pad, you may set it on "low," place a towel over the heating pad, and then set the box with the bird in it on top of the heating pad. A good temperature for an injured songbird is 85 degrees.

Put the cardboard box in an area inside the house where the bird will be away from pets and children, an area that is quiet and in the dark, not air-conditioned and not in the sun. Then leave him alone.

Important: Do not give the bird any food or water unless a rehabilitator specifically instructs you to. It is very easy to drown a bird.

How do I contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator?

See "How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator" if you don't already have that information handy. Call the rehabilitator before you transport the bird. When you call, make sure that the rehabilitator takes in songbirds. If not, ask for the name and number of a rehabilitator who does care for songbirds. You'll often need to leave a message on the answering machine; you should expect a call back within half an hour. Otherwise, call another rehabilitator.

You'll almost always be responsible for transporting the bird to the rehabilitator yourself. The rehabilitator, who is usually a volunteer, cares for a great many very hungry birds, so she or he cannot usually leave them to pick up another one. There are some exceptions, though, and you can always ask whether the bird can be picked up. Ask the rehabilitator any questions you may have, make sure you get driving directions that you understand, and then leave immediately.

How do I transport the bird to a rehabilitator?

Your goal is to get the baby bird to a rehabilitator before an hour has passed. Before half an hour has passed is even better, but no matter what the length of time has been, if the bird is still alive, take him to the rehabilitator as soon as possible. In some areas of the country, of course, you may need to drive for an hour or even two, but you will be doing your best to save the life of the bird, so that he can be released back into the wild.

Don't ever try to care for the bird yourself. In most cases, the chances of the bird surviving and being successfully released back to the wild are almost non-existent. Only a licensed wildlife rehabilitator has the special equipment and the knowledge to take proper care of the injured bird.

On the drive, keep the box with the bird in it out of the sun and out of the air-conditioning, unless the air-conditioning is needed to lower the temperature to 85-90 degrees. If the air-conditioning is essential, protect the bird from the breeze. The box needs to be out of any breeze – including a breeze from slightly opened windows. The bird will need quiet, but soothing music at a low volume is fine.

Carry and place the box gently in the car. Young children should not hold or sit next to the box; they are not able to hold the box level and steady enough to avoid re-injuring the bird. If possible, it is better not to bring children with you.

When you arrive, the rehabilitator may have a wildlife center or may be doing rehabilitation out of his or her home. Don't be alarmed by the latter – many rehabilitators operate out of their homes, and they are just as well qualified as those in wildlife centers.

Be prepared to provide some information, such as your name, your address, the time and the exact location where you found the bird, and, if you saw what happened to the bird, a description of the incident. If you wish to, ask the rehabilitator if you may call later and find out how the bird is doing.

Once you've turned the bird over to the rehabilitator, congratulate yourself on doing the best you could to help an innocent little bird to live and be released back to the wild.

How can I be prepared ahead of time?

If you're reading this before you find a bird who needs help, there are several things you can do to be better prepared for such an emergency:

- Have the name and number of a wildlife rehabilitator handy by your phone. If you don't have that information already, see "How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator."
- Find a suitable box for an injured bird and get it ready (see instructions above).
- Read the other resources in this section of the website.

Sharon St. Joan established Feathered Friends at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary and has cared for birds and wildlife for over 15 years. She now devotes her time to writing about birds and wildlife-related issues.

See also: [Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 1](#)
[How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator](#)