

# Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 1

By Sharon St. Joan

## To rescue or not to rescue?

If you find a baby songbird on the ground, you'll need to know two things to determine whether or not the baby bird needs help. First, you'll need to know if the bird is injured and, second, you'll need to know if it's a fledgling or a nestling.

## First: Is the baby bird injured?

If it is clear to you that the baby is injured, then you will need to take the baby bird to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator immediately. (See "How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator.") Consider the bird injured if he is bleeding, if he feels cold and has his eyes closed or partly closed in a slit, or if he looks exhausted, dehydrated, droopy, or rather lifeless.

If you are not sure whether the baby bird is injured or healthy, call a rehabilitator and ask for advice. It's generally a good idea to call first, in any case, before taking a bird to a rehabilitator.

## Second: Is the baby bird a fledgling or a nestling?

If you feel that the baby bird is not injured (i.e., the bird seems lively and normal), then it will be helpful to try to determine whether the baby is a fledgling (ready to fly) or a nestling (too young to fly). Making this determination will help you know what to do next. However, it can be very difficult for people who are not accustomed to studying birds to tell the difference between a fledgling and a nestling. If you feel doubtful, call a rehabilitator and ask for help.

A fledgling may:

- Look like an adult, but seem unable to fly
- Seem rather awkward or hesitant in his movements
- Look like he has all his feathers, but he may (or may not) be a little fluffy



A fledgling looks like an adult, and is the same size as an adult of the same species. In the spring and summer, a bird that you find on the ground who looks old enough to fly is likely to be a fledgling.

A nestling may:

- Have no feathers at all, just bare skin
- Be covered in down
- Have pin feathers, which are little dark beginnings of feathers that look like pins
- Have most of his feathers, but still look quite fluffy and not like an adult
- Look quite pear-shaped, as if his body is too heavy for his small wings
- Seem rather tame and may gape (open his mouth for food) or chirp energetically

A nestling may also not have any of these characteristics – and a fledgling also may gape or chirp. As you can see, it may not be easy to tell the difference!

If you do feel certain that you have a nestling or that you have a fledgling, then read the appropriate section below. Otherwise, call a rehabilitator for help.

## How do I help a nestling songbird?

A nestling is a young bird who belongs back in the nest. Sometimes, nestlings fall out of the nest, and they need help getting back in, since the parent birds do not have the ability to pick up the baby bird and return it to the nest. Baby birds are unable to survive outside the nest, even if their parents are still feeding them.

If possible, a healthy nestling should be returned to the nest. Here's how to do this:

1. Look for the nest. Once you find it, look in the nest to see if there are other babies there who look the same as the one you found.
2. If there are, then replace the baby in its nest. It's okay to use your hands. (It is not true that parent birds will not feed their babies after they have been touched by human hands.)
3. Check nearby on the ground for more babies who may have fallen out.
4. Watch from a distance of around 80 feet (you'll need to use your own judgment) or, even better, from a window inside, to see if the parents return and feed the babies. Don't stand too close: If you stand too close, or if you are easily visible through the window, you will be preventing the parents from returning to feed the babies. This is a very common mistake; birds have excellent eyesight, and they can easily see you.

Keep children and pets inside while you are watching the nest. If you see the parents return to feed the babies, you can stop watching – the babies should be fine. While watching, do not take your eyes away from the nest at all, even for a moment, or you may miss seeing the parents return. It may only take them a second to return and feed the babies; they are very quick!

If the baby bird falls out of the nest a second time, he should be taken to a rehabilitator.

## What if the parents don't return?

If the parents do not return, either you are standing too close, or something else is preventing them from returning. Parent birds are excellent parents, and will always feed their babies if they are able to. Move further away and watch again. If the parents still don't return, call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator and ask for advice.

Quick action is very important. Nestling songbirds are fed by their parents several times each hour. They can generally go for an hour or so without food, but you must take action within a short time after you discover the bird. The baby bird cannot wait until you return from work in the afternoon or until you run some errands – he will not survive. Never, ever attempt to rehabilitate the bird yourself, since you'll do more harm than good. Do not give the baby bird any food or water, because it is very easy to drown them. Instead, call a rehabilitator.

Even if you don't see the parents return, if the babies in the nest appear active and healthy, that is a good indication that they are being fed, and they should not be moved. However, if the parents are not sitting on the nest by nightfall, something is definitely wrong. Pigeons and doves do not need to feed their babies often, but like other birds, they will always return at night. Don't ever shine a light into a bird's nest at night.

This advice is given to be helpful, but every situation is different and if, at any point, you feel confused or uncertain, call a rehabilitator and ask for help that relates specifically to your situation. The sooner you call, the easier it will be to help the baby birds.

## **What do I do if the nest is inaccessible or nowhere to be found?**

If you cannot find the nest or you are unable to get up to the nest, take the baby bird to a rehabilitator.

Sometimes the entire nest may have been destroyed or blown down by the wind. If you suspect that the nest was destroyed by a predator, such as a cat, it is best to take the baby, or babies, to a rehabilitator. If the birds are in immediate danger from hazards like dogs or cats, construction work, or tree pruning activities, first try to remove the danger. If this isn't possible, take the babies to a rehabilitator.

If the nest was blown down in a storm, it is often possible to fix the nest securely back in the tree. Some ingenuity may be required. You could try placing the remains of the nest in the bottom of a shoebox or other small cardboard box, or you could try creating an artificial nest of cardboard, perhaps with some straw in it. The cardboard will need a few tiny holes in the bottom as drainage. In areas with a lot of rain, you may need to use plywood with drainage holes. The sides of the new nest should not be higher than the sides of the original nest. You can call a rehabilitator for advice.

Put the babies into the nest that you have secured, then follow the instructions above that explain how to tell if the parents are returning to the nest.

## **How do I help a fledgling songbird?**

A fledgling is a young bird who is ready to leave the nest. Many fledglings are "rescued" unnecessarily. An uninjured fledgling who is with his parents does not need to be rescued.

A fledgling normally spends a couple of days sitting on the edge of the nest; then he half-falls, half-flies off. He may land on the ground underneath the nest and may remain there for several hours, not knowing that he is able to fly. This is a very different situation from the one described above, in which a nestling falls out of the nest and lands on the ground. The fledgling can fly; the nestling cannot fly, and he cannot survive outside the nest. They need different kinds of help; that's why it's good if you can determine whether you've found a fledgling or a nestling.

A fledgling generally looks like an adult, but you are most likely to find a fledgling songbird in the spring or summer. If you see a bird on the ground who looks like she should be able to fly, and if you are able to approach and pick up the bird, then lift the bird up and set her on a low branch. The bird will probably fly to a nearby branch. Whether or not the bird flies, if she appears uninjured, leave her alone – she should be fine. If there are other birds nearby who look the same, it's a good sign, because they are probably parents or siblings. Two birds hovering about are most likely the fledgling's parents.

## **What if the fledgling has already been separated from her parents?**

Separation from the parents can happen if a cat, a dog or a child (or an adult attempting to "rescue" the bird) has picked up the fledgling and moved her to another location. If that's the case, the fledgling will be unable to survive on her own, since the parents continue to feed the fledgling for two or three weeks after she has left the nest. So, an orphaned fledgling always needs to be taken to a rehabilitator.

Because a fledgling can starve to death if separated from her parents, she must not be released in a different location from where she was found. Do not release a baby bird in a different location simply because you discover that she can fly; she cannot feed herself.

If a fledgling is in immediate danger from a cat or dog, construction work, or other threats, try to remove the danger. If the danger is from a cat or dog, it may be possible to arrange for the cat or dog to stay inside for at least a couple of days (longer is better). After a couple of days out of the nest, the fledgling will have had more practice flying, and it will be easier for her to escape a predator. If it's not possible to remove the danger, and particularly if other birds have already been killed, then you may need to take the fledgling to a rehabilitator. But, do not remove a fledgling from her parents unless it is really necessary.

### **Remember...**

- Any injured, cold, or listless baby songbird (either fledgling or nestling) should be taken immediately to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.
- A healthy nestling should be returned to the nest; if this is not possible, she should be taken right away to a rehabilitator.
- A healthy fledgling who is being fed by his parents does not need to be “rescued.” A fledgling who has been separated from his parents, however, should be taken to a rehabilitator, since even if he can fly, he may starve without his parents around to feed him.
- Do not put any food or liquid into any bird’s mouth. If there is a delay in transporting the bird to a rehabilitator, call a rehabilitator for advice.
- It’s vital to act quickly if a baby songbird needs help. If at all possible, return her to her nest or take her to a rehabilitator within an hour.
- Before transporting a baby songbird to a rehabilitator, see the resource “Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 2.”
- Finally, to find a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, see the resource “How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator.”

*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 2](#)  
[How to Find a Wildlife Rehabilitator](#)