

Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 2

By Sharon St. Joan

First, to determine whether a baby bird needs rescuing, please read “Rescuing Baby Songbirds: Part 1.” Otherwise, there is a danger that you may unknowingly be taking a healthy baby bird away from his parents. If you think a baby bird needs rescuing, read on.

How should I hold and observe a baby songbird?



Most of us are used to looking at birds as they fly or as they perch at a feeder. They are at least a few feet away. We are not accustomed to holding them or to noticing how they look at a distance of a few inches.

If you find a baby bird on the ground, don't be afraid to pick her up. Don't worry that picking her up will cause her parents to reject her – that's a myth. You'll need to pick her up in order to help her. Pick her up with your hands and hold her firmly, but gently. Take care not to hold her too tightly, but don't hold her so loosely that she is in danger of dropping.

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.

A baby bird will not hurt you, and, if you hold her securely and carefully, you will not hurt her. However, do not hold the bird any longer than you need to. Be aware that the baby bird is very frightened. Besides being injured, she has just lost her home and her parents, and is being held by a large predator – you. (She doesn't know about your kind intentions.) The older a baby bird is and the closer she is to being a fledging, the more frightened she will be.

Take her 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 you brought the baby bird in because you thought she might be injured, but you weren't sure, then take this opportunity to look again at the baby bird, while still holding her. Just glance quickly to determine whether or not the bird is injured, cold, listless, or has her eyes half-closed in a slit. If this seems to be the case, the bird must be taken immediately to a rehabilitator.

As mentioned in Part 1, if the bird cannot be returned to her parents (for a fledgling, because you don't know where the bird was first found or, for a nestling, because you cannot find or reach the nest), then the bird needs to go to a rehabilitator immediately.

How do I prepare a “nest” for the bird?

Before you contact a rehabilitator, you'll need to prepare a “nest” 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. You can use about a dozen Kleenex tissues, wrapped around and around in a doughnut shape, placing the bird inside it.

If the bird is old enough and well enough to walk or perch, he will do that, and that's fine. If the bird is only a few days old or is too sick to move, he will stay in the nest; the nest for very young birds must fit very securely around the bird, with no extra room. The sides should come up to about two-thirds the height of the bird, and not higher than his head.

If the bird is a fledgling and can fly, put the nest in anyway – he may perch on it. Put the bird in very carefully, after the top (see below) is ready to go on, so that he does not have the opportunity to fly away from you.

Before you place the bird in the box, 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.

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 a baby songbird is generally 85-90 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 you are specifically instructed to do so by a rehabilitator. 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 baby 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 rehabilitate the bird yourself – the chances of the bird surviving and being successfully released into the wild are less than 1%. In the hands of the rehabilitator, however, the chances for a baby bird are good, from 50% to 75%.

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 baby 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 the bird's "nest" 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](#)