I found a baby bird! Now what?

There are many circumstances in which you could find a baby bird who seems to need help, and a lot of the information out there might not be right for your region, the type of bird you have, or the specific circumstances of the bird you found.

These directions apply to most birds in North America, but if this guide doesn't seem to fit what you have, you should always default to the least amount of intervention possible until you can speak to a wildlife professional.

First, do no harm.

When we see a helpless animal, our first instinct is to rush over to the animal and scoop it up, make it warm, and feed it. ALL of these impulses are the worst things you can do for baby birds (and most other wildlife!)

Before you kidnap, take a minute to use the following assessments.

1) Is the bird in immediate danger? Is it in a dog's mouth or being stalked by a cat? Is it in the street or parking lot? Is it in the path of yard work happening right now that can't be stopped?

If the bird is in immediate danger and must be moved, slowly and quietly approach the bird with a sheet or towel and a cardboard box, drop the sheet over the bird, and gently lift or scoop into the box and remove it to a quiet place. Don't peek at the bird until you are somewhere safe.

If the bird is not in immediate danger, perform your assessments from a distance to avoid stressing the bird.

2) Determine the age of the bird. You can search for pictures on the internet for the following keywords: hatchling, nestling, fledgling.

Hatchlings have bare skin, eyes closed, probably cannot lift their head or use their legs, and have no feathers or very scraggly feathers.

Nestlings are birds who aren't old enough to leave the nest, but they can look very different depending on age and species. Young nestlings can be bare or have downy feathers and are starting to develop neck strength and move their wings and legs. Older nestlings will have thicker feather coverings, have open eyes, and may squawk or chirp. They may be able to stand and flap.

Fledglings are leaving the nest and learning to fly. They will be almost fully feathered, though you might see some remaining wisps of down poking out. They will be very upright and be able to run or hop a little, and may flap vigorously with or without gaining any height.

3) Determine if the parents are around. Birds are really good parents, and they know how long is okay to leave their baby. Look and listen for the parent calling to the baby or making alarm noises at you.

If you see a bird repeatedly flying past where the baby is, that's probably the parent checking on them.

I think I know how old the bird is, now what?

Hatchlings and nestlings need to go back into their nest if possible.

The mother will NOT reject them if touched by a human. Look around for the nest close to where the baby fell. Nests are hard to find for a reason so walk around the trees and bushes, and try watching where the parent bird is flying from – they will likely be feeding other babies, so listen for the feeding calls of the siblings.

If you have found a whole nest on the ground from weather or landscaping mishaps, you can put the whole nest and babies back in the tree! The parents will come to care for the young even if the nest isn't exactly where it was originally.

Fledglings are awkward teenagers, but the parents are still helping them.

Go ahead and leave them alone if they are in a safe place. Walk your dog to the park instead of letting them out in the yard for a few days. Warn children, maintenance and lawn care, and visitors of the new birds. They will be off to new things in a few days and everyone can go back to normal. If it's not safe to leave them where they are you can try to slowly herd them into

bushes or gently catch them in a box and put them somewhere safe but close by, like on the other side of the fence or hedges.

The baby bird looks really hurt or I can't find the nest, now what?

1. If you have a bird that is visibly injured, or the parents have not been seen for several hours, or the nest site is completely destroyed or cannot be located, only then should you resort to taking the birds into human care.
2. DO NOT give the birds anything by mouth, ever. No water, no food, nothing. Baby birds can aspirate and die easily. Same for injured adult birds. Resist this urge completely.

3. Keep them warm, dark, and quiet – but don't smother them. Put them in a very small box (you actually don't want them to move around very much) loosely covered with a cloth. Pad the bottom with a loose nest of toilet paper or cloth. You can put a rice sock or heating pad on low on one side of the box.

4. No peeking! Wild animals are stressed pretty much 100% of the time that they are in captivity. Humans have eyes on the front of their face, which is a trait of a predator. Human voices are terrifying, as are artificial lights. Sometimes baby animals in distress will go toward noise or warmth looking for help, but they still know we aren't mom and dad.

5. Get them to a licensed wildlife rehabber. Baby birds require very specialized care and diets depending on their species, and under state and federal laws it is not legal for an individual to keep and raise a wild bird without a permit. Unfortunately, most rehab organizations don't have the ability to pick up animals, so be prepared to take the bird to them. Additionally, these rescues are usually not funded by federal or state money, so donating some money toward the care of the animal and/or becoming a volunteer are great ways for you to ensure the baby you rescued grows up to be released!

6. Understand that some animals cannot be saved. Often people think that euthanasia is the worst outcome that can happen for an animal and that living in captivity is a better solution. Some animals are suitable for becoming education animals, but for some animals, especially very young ones with severe illness or injury, it is the kindest thing to end their suffering and not prolong their pain and struggle. Rescue organizations try their very best with every animal, but there are not homes, resources, or carers for every animal with intense medical needs. Many of the animals eventually die anyway, even when extraordinary efforts are made, and we must remember this takes away

from the ability to help possibly hundreds of other more viable patients. It's a terrible decision to have to make, but it's one of the sad outcomes from human-animal interactions.

7. Nearly all mammals and birds are protected by State and Federal laws. It is against the law to have in your possession a mammal (or its nest) or a bird (its nest, feathers, or eggs) without special permits. So please, don't try to rehab an animal yourself!

I did it, I helped a bird!

Congratulations! By following these guidelines, you have done a great service! Successful rehoming or rehabilitation of wildlife is a very rewarding feeling, but it doesn't have to stop there. You can continue to help by learning more about birds and their needs, spreading this knowledge to others, and getting involved in conserving bird habitats to ensure the future enjoyment of birds for everyone. We have volunteer and education opportunities ongoing throughout the year. Thank you for caring about birds!

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