

FEATHERED ORPHANS

By Sally Joosten

Perhaps the children bring you a nest full of baby birds or you notice the dog playing with one in the yard. Perhaps you see a young bird fluttering along in front of the lawn mower. You are not sure what you should do. The following guidelines should help.

Please read the following guidelines to determine when and if help is needed. If after reading this information you determine help is needed, please contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator ([click here for a list](#)) that is located near you. Do not attempt to treat the animal yourself or provide food and water without consulting a licensed wildlife rehabilitator first since this can cause illness or death. The care of a knowledgeable licensed wildlife rehabilitator can help ensure the successful release of the animal back to the wild.

THE NESTLING BIRD

If the young bird is half down/ half naked or is wearing pin feathers, it belongs in a nest. Place the youngster in the original nest if you can locate it. Birds have a very poor sense of smell and your handling it will not discourage its parents from resuming their care. If the original nest is not to be seen or is not reachable, make a foster nest out of small basket, berry basket, kitchen strainer, or a small plastic bowl with holes punched in the bottom. Line it with dry grass or soft pine needles. Don't use cotton. Young birds can become tangled in cotton. Put the nest as near to the original location as possible or in a sheltered place near where the bird was found (not on the ground). Then, get out of sight and watch. The sound of a hungry nestling is usually too much for parent birds to resist, and they will return to feed the nestling. (Nestlings are fragile. Children should not be allowed to handle or play with them)

THE FLEDGLING BIRD

If the young bird you find looks like a bird (feathers over most of its body), it has probably left the nest of its own free will. Wing feathers and any amount of tail feathers are a definite sign of nest departure in most birds. Putting this bird back in a nest is a waste of time. It will leave again as soon as it can. If the bird is in a safe place, leave it alone. If not, place it in a tree or dense shrub, but do not move it very far. Remember this young bird has four or five brothers and sisters hiding nearby. It may take the parent birds awhile to get around to feeding this youngster. Your hovering about will only delay the process. Leave the area.

Birds at this age are very vulnerable to human "good intentions." They leave the nest at the age of about 10 days. They cannot fly well and know that their best chance for survival is to sit still and hope that they will not be seen. It is very unlikely that both parents have deserted the fledgling or that it has become lost. The parent birds can provide their youngster with the knowledge it needs to survive in the wild. You cannot. Leave it alone.

THE ADULT BIRD

Adult birds that are injured or sick are very difficult to help. The shock of being handled by a human being is extremely stressful and can be too much for them. They need special care and handling or they will die.

Most adult birds that are found near a house have flown into a window and are dazed from their collision. Place them in a large grocery bag with a paper towel for footing and some weight in the bottom. Fold the top over and fasten with a paper clip or a clamp. Place the bag in a quiet area.

Fluttering indicates recovery. Take the bird outside and open the top of the bag. If the bird can fly out on its own, it has recovered. Don't help it out. If the bird cannot fly out by itself, it may have more extensive injuries, and you should call for help or advice. Birds that have been caught by cats or dogs suffer from shock and should receive the paper bag treatment. Call for help. Broken legs and wings or wounds should receive immediate medical attention.

Please remember that birds come in all shapes, sizes and lifestyles. Try to determine the type of bird you are trying to help. Young pheasants, ducklings, killdeers, etc. are precocial. They are able to feed themselves within hours of hatching. Young doves and pigeons need pigeon milk. Other altricial birds (born blind and helpless) need insect protein.

Nestlings need to be fed every 15-30 minutes from sunup to sunset. Nestlings need protein in the form of insects, not seeds. Nestlings need warmth.

RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP

The number one reason nestlings and fledgling birds are brought to wildlife rehabilitators is injuries caused by free-roaming pets. The best way to prevent injuries is to keep your cats and dogs confined and leashed.

Remember, wild birds are protected by federal and state laws which prohibit private possession. Help birds when they need help by finding professional assistance for them as quickly as you can.

If you find an orphaned or injured wild animal, please call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator ([click here for a list](#)) that is located near you.

(Sally Joosten is a founding Board member of The GROW Hospital and Clinical Research Center and has been a professional wildlife rehabilitator and educator, specializing in teaching others who are getting started in the field of wildlife rehabilitation since 1963. She is founder & former Director of McHenry County Conservation District Wildlife Center located in Illinois for twenty years beginning in 1975. She is a founding Board member of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA) and Co-author of "NWRA Principles of Wildlife Rehabilitation, The Essential Guide for Novice and Experienced Rehabilitators" (1st and 2nd Editions). She is founding Board member and current Vice President of the Illinois Wildlife Rehabilitators Association. She has written numerous published papers. She was the recipient of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1998 and the National Registry of Who's Who in 1999.)