

Home & Garden Education Center



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Does This Baby Bird Need Help?

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If you spend any time outdoors in spring and early summer, chances are that you have come across a baby bird. Looking helpless and vulnerable, our immediate response is to want to assist the little creature. Although occasionally human intervention is necessary, in many cases, it is unwarranted.

Most likely, the baby bird you happen upon is a fledgling that has left its nest. These young birds are usually fully feathered but their feathers may be short as they are not completely formed yet. Often they will leave the nest a few days before they can fly. Healthy fledglings can flutter, hop, grasp branches or your finger tightly with their feet, and may be able to fly short distances. Chances are one or both parents are keeping an eye on them and feeding them at regular intervals.

In most instances, you should just leave them alone and watch them from a distance for an hour or so to make sure the parents are around. Obviously if the bird is in a dangerous situation such as on a street or sidewalk or other area with vehicle or foot traffic, it can be moved to a safer area but still close to where it was discovered. Do not let children play with the bird and keep pets away as well. Cats are the number one cause of injuries to baby songbirds and should not be allowed outdoors especially during breeding season. (Author's note: all of our cats were strays and they all adapted to life indoors).

Find a comfortable observation point some distance from the fledgling and watch carefully. Often parent birds are taking care of several fledglings and they will fly in quickly to feed their youngster and then go on searching for more food. If after an hour you have not seen the parents feed the young bird, the next thing to do is to check its droppings. Look on the ground near it and see if the droppings are both dark and light in color. If so, the bird is being regularly fed by its parents and is best left alone. Healthy fledglings may also wander off on their own.

If there are no droppings by the bird or if they are mostly clear or white, that would indicate the bird is not being fed by its parents. Maybe something happened to the parents or maybe the young bird is in an area where the parents are frightened by people or predators.

Occasionally, a very young nestling falls or gets pushed out of the nest. This tiny creature will have few feathers and certainly not be capable of moving about or grasping onto your finger. The nest will be near but often it is well hidden. Do your best to find it and place the bird back inside? Parents will not abandon their nests if a baby bird is touched by humans.

If you see the nest and it is too high to replace the bird or it appears destroyed, you can try making a replacement nest out of a small wicker basket or berry basket or even a plastic food tub such as a margarine container. If a plastic tub is used, make sure there are drainage holes in the bottom. Line the new 'nest' with a thick padding of dried grass shaped into a bowl and attach it to a tree as close to the original nest as possible. Set the bird inside and watch from a distance for a while to see if the parents find their missing nestling. These young birds need to be fed several times an hour by the parents.

Occasionally fledglings or nestlings can't be reunited with their parents and need to be cared for by humans. According to the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP), it is unlawful for any person, other than an appointed wildlife rehabilitator, to care for wildlife. Visit their website for links to [Connecticut wildlife rehabilitators](#). Also, the [Connecticut Wildlife Rehabilitators Association](#) lists rehabilitators throughout Connecticut.

Healthy, active fledglings should be left in their parents care. Birds of any age may require assistance if they are injured. Even if injuries are not visible, look for signs like eyes closing, difficulty standing upright and dropping wings. Reach out to a rehabilitator near you. Keep in mind rehabilitators are typically volunteers and may need some time to get back to you.

Despite our best intentions, it is difficult to care for baby birds. They require special diets and their parents feed them one or more times each hour during the day. Do not try to offer them food or water as there is a special way to feed baby birds and they can easily choke or the food or water could go into their lungs. Instead, while waiting for the rehabilitator to get back, keep them in a box lined with paper towels and in a dimly lit, quiet spot.

We should all try to create safe habitats for both nesting and visiting birds in our yards whenever possible. Plant a variety of trees and shrubs, set up some birdbaths, keep pets away from nesting birds and teach children to respect and appreciate wildlife. Our songbirds are precious, their populations are dwindling and so we should help them when we can.

For information on plants to attract birds or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.