What to do with an orphaned or injured bird

by Anne Muraski

During the spring baby season, The SPCA receives hundreds of birds at the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center. Almost one third of all the Center's patients are injured and orphaned songbirds. We need your help! You can make a difference by becoming a volunteer baby bird feeder at the Center (call ext. 223), and by knowing what to do when you encounter a bird.

Nestling on the ground

If you find a naked or near-naked (just pin feathers) nestling on the ground you should try to return it to the nest. It is a myth that birds will reject young handled by humans. Make sure the nestmates look the same as the one you are replacing. If you cannot find the nest or it is inaccessible, you can fashion a temporary one with a small box, a margarine tub, or a cut-down milk carton (avoidberry baskets; birds can tangle their legs in them). Punch holes in the bottom of the container for drainage. Fill it with soft bedding material and fasten it to the tree or another high place safe from predators.

If you find a nest on the ground containing babies or eggs, you can return it to a nearby tree also; if need be, put the nest in small box or basket to help secure it. Watch the nest from a distance to confirm that parents return to feed young—this could take several hours.

Fledgling on the ground

If you find a juvenile bird on the ground that has feathers, is mobile, but cannot fly up except to low branches, it may be one of many species (scrub jays, crows) whose fledglings spend weeks on the ground learning to fly. During this time, young are still fed and protected by a parent, who will either be protecting your presence or will appear if you leave the area and observe from a distance.

If a nearby nest has similarly developed fledglings inside, you can try returning the bird to the nest, but often it will fly out again. The only times that a fledgling needs rescue is if the bird appears sick (is immobile with puffed up feathers, or has an obvious injury), or is in imminent danger from neighborhood cats.

If you see a cat stalking a bird, chase it away, spray it lightly with a hose, or use a pump sprayer on the "stream" setting. You can protect a bird quickly by covering it with a box or wastebasket. Cat-caught birds should always be brought to the Center; puncture wounds are hard to detect and birds need antibiotics to survive them. If you know the cat's owner, give him or her our cat predation educational sheet: Do Our Pets Hurt Wildlife? (see sidebar on flip side).

If an injured fledgling or adult runs away, you may throw a light towel over it to aid in capture. Place the bird in a covered box on some soft clothes or tissues (grass may be too wet). Minimum contact reduces stress and increases any animal's chances of survival. Do not handle the bird or keep checking on him. Do not put any rescued animal in a cage where they can see you—cover them at all times. Keep all rescued wildlife dark, warm and quiet, and away from pets and children.

Songbirds feed their young every 15-30 minutes, so time is of the essence. You can help by bringing the bird to The SPCA Wildlife Center as soon as possible. While SPCA Wildlife Rescue is always on-call, there are only one or two officers to respond to all emergencies throughout Monterey County. They must triage dozens of calls, and if they are handling a deer hit by a car or other emergency it may be hours before they arrive. That's why it's important to capture and contain the bird for pick-up. At the very least, cover the bird with a weighted box or trash can, or corral it into your garage or other enclosure so the animal is still there when the rescue worker arrives.

Short-term care of birds

The sooner the bird is delivered to The SPCA Wildlife Center, the better its chances of survival. These instructions should be followed only when the bird cannot be transported within a couple hours.

If the bird is lethargic and puffed up, it may be cold, dehydrated and hungry. Follow these steps: 1) warm the bird, 2) to prevent shock, provide fluids only after the bird is warm, and 3) feed the bird only after it is rehydrated, and only if it is gaping. (Feeding is optional; fluids are most important.) First, warm the bird up by placing it in a box with a hot water bottle or heating pad closed to the low setting. Provide some soft layers between the heat source and the bird, and allow space for the bird to move away from the heat source if it chooses.

After the bird is warm, you can try dribbling a few drops of water or rehydration solution on the outside of the beak, which may trigger the bird to swallow. Use children's Pedialyte, Gatorade, or a solution of one tablespoon of sugar and one teaspoon of salt to one quart of water. Never force open the beak to give fluids—it
is easy to get fluid in the lungs.

If it is late in the day or after hours, an SPCA rescue worker may ask you to keep a bird overnight. Since songbirds do not feed young after dark, and the Center is closed at night, an officer can pick up the bird in the morning on regular rounds. In this instance, you may want to offer the bird some food to sustain it through the night (provided the bird is hydrated). Soften high protein dog or cat food (preferably dry, but use canned if need be) with water or rehydration solution to make a mash, or use a poultry baby food; it should be slightly warmer than room temperature. Offer the food on the end of a straw or coffee stirrer. Place the food carefully toward the back of the mouth and allow the bird to swallow. Feed until the bird stops gasping. Do not force food down the throat, or offer any other food such as bread, crackers, etc.

Warning: pet food and baby food are not adequate baby bird diets. This is only an emergency, short-term measure to help stabilize the bird until it arrives at the Center, where it can be examined for injuries, identified by species, and given the proper diet and medical care.

**Birds hitting windows**

This usually occurs with large picture windows when the bird can see through part of the building to the yard beyond, or when houseplants are positioned inside near the window. Make the window more visible by closing shades or affixing decals or strips of masking tape to the glass. Sometimes a bird will repeatedly peck or fly into windows when it sees its own reflection; this usually occurs only during nesting season. To remove the reflection, place a bright light inside near the glass, or simply cover the outside of the glass with a sheet temporarily. If a bird is grounded after striking your window, put it in a covered box lined with a soft cloth and keep it dark, warm and quiet. If it doesn't recover in a few hours, bring it to The SPCA or call ext. 0 for help.

**How to prevent injuries and orphans**

- Do not trim trees during the April–September baby bird season. All native bird species are protected by federal law, and that includes nests with eggs or babies.

- Be sure bird feeders are inaccessible to climbing cats. Locate feeders away from brush that might provide cover. Don't feed birds on the ground. If cats threaten your feeder, wrap a 2- to 3-foot-wide piece of metal sheeting or other barrier around the tree trunk at approximately 4 to 6 feet off the ground to prevent climbing.

- Never remove young from a nest. All wild mothers must leave their young for periods of time to forage, and an unguarded nest is not necessarily abandoned. You may be keeping adults away with your presence. Observe from a distance and if an adult doesn’t appear within two hours, call SPCA Wildlife Rescue.

- For the safety of cats and wildlife, keep cats indoors, especially during the April–September baby season. Cats are domestic, introduced species and are not a part of any natural ecosystem; their local populations can vastly outnumber all wild predators combined. Most cat predation occurs at dawn and dusk when wildlife is most active, so confining cats at night is especially important. If part of your yard has habitat value, do not let it become a "bait station." Enclose the area with a low-cost, flimsy plywood or sheet of cloth. Angle the top of the fence slightly outward and anchor it to keep the unstable structure. This is a good temporary solution to exclude cats from an area where adult are feeding fledglings on the ground, or to protect even a single bush or tree that contains nests. See the Do Our Pets Hurt Wildlife education sheet for more solutions, and share the sheet with your pet-loving neighbors.

- Never try to care for a bird or any wild animal yourself—it is illegal to possess wildlife without a permit, and baby birds need to be fed every 15–30 minutes, from dawn to dusk. All animals have special food requirements, especially developing young—even a day or two of the wrong diet can permanently damage bones or tissue. Different species may require nectar, larvae, or certain insects or seeds. Also, diets require adjustment as an animal matures. Birds raised at the Wildlife Center also benefit from the company of other orphans of their own species. If you raise a baby bird alone, it may not be able to survive in the wild. If you are able to capture a wild animal, it probably needs medical attention to survive.

- Never use glueboards or sticky substances (polybutenes) that are marketed to trap rodents or discourage birds and squirrels from climbing or roosting. Use can result in violations of the Federal Migratory Bird Act or state humane laws. These products cause prolonged agony—many exposed animals who have arrived at the SPCA Wildlife Center have had to be euthanized.

**Wrap-up**

If you find a baby bird, take time to observe the situation. Is the bird active and alert? Is it healthy looking? Then it's probably best to leave this bird alone, unless cats are threatening it. Is the bird puffed up and unwilling to move? This bird may be injured, and should be examined at the Wildlife Center. Is the bird naked? This bird is too young to survive on its own and probably fell from a nearby nest—return it to the nest or deliver it to the Wildlife Center. Has the bird been lying in the sun? Then it probably needs fluids. Was the bird swatted by a car? All car-caught birds need antibiotics in order to survive.

Using common sense will help you make a decision on whether to remove the bird to the nest, leave it alone, or deliver it to The SPCA. When in doubt, call the Wildlife Rescue hotline at extension 0.