

Please put that little bird back



Spring is the time of year when a flood of phone calls comes into BOCA, all on similar lines:

"I have found) a little bird.
The children have brought home)
It has (fluffy grey feathers
(no feathers).
It was (in the garden
(on the ground
(caught by the cat
(blown out of the nest
(deserted by the parents

What can I do to save its life?"

The most important thing to remember is that the parent birds have a much better chance of raising that little bundle of fluff than you, however great your dedication. The food they provide will be of the correct quantity, content and consistency and they will keep their babies warm at night. Therefore your first priority is to involve the parents in the "rescue".

If the little bird is feathered (not naked) and is found on an exposed branch or wire, the probability is that it is not an orphan awaiting rescue, but is quietly waiting out the time between feeds. Not all young birds are fed at frequent intervals; some may be fed only at dawn and dusk and during the day may seem abandoned.

A feathered nestling on the ground may have been blown out of the nest, but equally may be just out of the nest and still unsteady on wings or feet. Young birds often scramble around in nearby bushes and trees for a day or two after leaving the nest. You might try placing it in higher cover, out of the reach of cats and dogs, but don't move it too far.

If children have brought a young bird home, an immediate attempt should be made to take it back to the precise area where it was found. The parents may still be in the vicinity and the calls of the young bird will attract their attention.

If some disaster such as a fallen tree or a storm has genuinely destroyed a nest, an idea that has been successful on a number of occasions is "rescue by basket". Place newspaper or tissues in a small basket, tie a length of cord to the basket handle and throw the cord over a branch in an area very close to the original nest.

Alternatively, if the nest has fallen to the ground, try to replace it in the same tree or close to it (again, a cane or wire basket may be needed if the nest has been damaged). A

black plastic flower pot of the right size also makes a good nest base.

Both of these strategies have proved successful when action was taken quickly so that the parents were still bonded to the babies and had stayed in the area.

If the nestling is almost featherless and definitely an orphan, the faster you seek help the better. Feeding tiny birds is time-consuming, fiddly and above all, requires dedication for at least two weeks.

There are licensed wildlife carers in many areas now, and your local municipality or wildlife department should be able to put you in touch with someone who can give advice. Be aware that native species are protected by law and you need a wildlife permit to hold them for any reason. If the little bundle of feathers survives its first twenty-four hours with you, you should make a telephone call to your nearest wildlife authority. As soon as the bird can fend for itself it must be returned to the wild and there will be difficulties associated with choosing an appropriate place.

However sad we feel about it, many creatures suffer from a high mortality during the first year of life. If you succeed in giving a wild bird another chance, it is a most rewarding experience.

Some of our callers are distressed when zoos, sanctuaries, RSPCA offices and wildlife shelters will not take orphaned or wounded wildlife. They are often too short of space and time to care for extra birds in the nesting season. At BOCA we will do our best to advise you what your options are, but cannot accept baby birds ourselves.

Remember, if you find a young bird, apparently deserted:

1. Do nothing but watch, unless it is obviously injured (and some youngsters not quite ready to fly can look injured as they flutter through the branches)
2. Try to work out what species it is and listen and look for the parents. If you ring for advice, size, beak and feet shape will be helpful in establishing its species and therefore its nutritional needs
3. If it is still on the ground when dusk falls, and you fear danger from cats, etc., place it out of danger overnight and release again at first light.

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