

# Rescuing Baby Birds

Statistically, over 75% of young birds that are rescued by well-intentioned people are, in fact, not orphans at all, are being well cared for, and don't actually need anyone's help!

Most of the time, the best thing you can do for a baby bird is to simply leave it alone. Wildlife's natural parents are always better at caring for them than human foster parents. A wild animal's chance of survival is greatly increased when left in its natural environment.

Groups like ours are inundated in spring and summer with so many 'orphans' that should have been left where they were.

Having said that, what about the 25% of babies that are genuine orphans?

When you find a baby bird, before making any decision to intervene, stop and watch for a while and then decide which of the following situations you're dealing with:

## 1. Fully-feathered fledgling (unhurt)

Fledglings (21 - 56 days) are fully feathered all over, and have no exposed skin. They are fully able to perch if altricial (young requiring parental care on hatching), and will be experimenting with flight – probably a youngster learning to fly.

If the baby bird is fully feathered and hopping around, it will usually be no more than 2 - 5 days away from flying. At this age, birds often jump or tumble out of the nest. The mother will continue to protect and feed it on the ground or in a shrub while it learns to use its wings.

If the parents are still feeding or calling to it, either **do nothing** or perch the bird in a heavy shrub or low tree.

Pets and children should be kept away until it is flying.

Observe from a distance for no more than 2 hours. If the mother doesn't appear within this time, or if you're sure she's dead, the bird will need to come into care.

## 2. Partially feathered (unhurt)

Partially feathered young (10 - 28 days) have still got some exposed skin, particularly on the belly. They may still have a mixture of down and pin feathers, but will also have a good covering of true feathers, particularly on their backs, wings, and tail. Depending on age, they may be able to perch if altricial.

Either return to original nest, if safe to do so, or make an artificial one using an old ice-cream container, with some drainage holes, hanging planter, or wicker basket, lined with soft straw or dry grass. Hang on a tree branch closest to where baby was found, 2 - 3 metres off the ground, away from the trunk, (protection from predators) and with overhead branches (for protection from the sun).

Once you've left, the parents should reappear and begin feeding baby. Observe from a distance for no more than 2 hours. Again, if mother does not appear, the baby will need to come into care.

## 3. Naked babies – hatchling (unhurt)

Hatchlings (0 - 14 days) have mostly exposed skin, and either no feathers or a light downy coat, particularly on their heads. They may have small, developing pin feathers on their wings and tail. They are unable to perch if altricial.

Hatchlings usually fall from the nest because of:

- ◆ Damage by wind or storm.



This tiny, partially-feathered Crested Pigeon was found on the ground, put into a makeshift nest and observed. Its parents came to feed it soon after.

- ◆ Removal by competitor birds, such as Indian Mynas and Cuckoos, and predators.

Re-nesting these babies is extremely difficult. They cannot survive very long without warmth and food from their parents.

## 4. An injured baby

An injured baby bird will need more active help.

If it's been attacked by a cat, it should always receive professional care, even if it appears unharmed.

Gently pick it up in a towel, and put both bird and towel into a well-ventilated box. Never try to feed a wounded bird straight away.

Keep the bird warm and quiet while you contact the Phone Volunteer to organise an experienced bird carer.

## 5. A special case – Precocial birds

Some baby birds are fully independent when hatched, eg Brush-turkey chicks will be on their own – don't look for a parent. Leave it alone, unless injured or in danger from its environment, eg cats, unhappy gardeners.

## It may take a few attempts & days

In her book, *Caring for Australian Native Birds*, Heather Parsons says that it may take several attempts to reunite a bird with its parents. She advises that the bird is returned to its collection site and allowed to call for its parents for an hour or two. If there is still no sign of the parents it should be taken back into care – temporarily.

“Repeat the procedure more than once a day, or even for several days. If the parents range over a large territory, they may be out of hearing for longish periods, but may return to the collection site later on.”

The bird will not be rejected because it has been in contact with humans. “It has been proven many, many times with young birds which have been in care for some time due to injury, whose parents welcome them back enthusiastically.”