

Is that Baby Bird Really an Orphan?

Usually, the mother is not far away, and it's best to leave it alone.

What should be done if you happen across a baby bird that appears to be orphaned? The first thing to consider is that the baby may not actually need your help.

Often, out-of-nest babies are mistaken for orphans or injured when the truth is they are simply doing what maturing birds do — preparing themselves to fly the coop. Coming to the rescue of baby birds who don't really need rescuing is one of the most common mistakes made by well-intentioned bird buffs. Cliff Shackelford, a non-game ornithologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, reminds us that “not everything that appears helpless is truly helpless.”

Many people still believe that once humans touch a baby bird, its parents will reject it. While that is incorrect, the truth is that by “helping” the baby bird, there is a good chance you have interrupted the parent's educational efforts or rescue attempts or even the baby's first attempts at spreading its own wings.

Shackelford cites baby blue jay behavior as a perfect example. “They look like a nestling but they're really a (flightless) fledgling,” he says. “Young blue jays often leave the nest before they can truly fly. Instead, they wander around on foot quite vocally so their parents can keep them fed and protected. Many folks pick up young blue jays not knowing that its parent is likely watching from the trees nearby.”

According to Roslyn Even, director of the Houston-based Texas Wildlife Rehabilitation Coalition, a bird that is already feathering will usually require only a short period of time before it becomes independent.

She explains that even with threats such as cats in the neighborhood, babies are most often better off left with the mother or father. “The parent will teach the fledgling necessary survival skills that we can't, so it is important that the fledgling be left with the parent,” she explains.

However, there are obvious instances when baby birds (especially nestlings) should be relocated, such as removing them from the path of approaching ants or traffic. Lynn Cuny, founder and executive director of Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation in Kendalia, says you should first see if you can locate the nest the baby fell from. “If you can't,” she says, “create a makeshift nest in a shoebox and line it with an old T-shirt. Never line it with a towel, because babies often get their claws caught up in the frayed strings.” Then, secure the nest in dense shrubbery or a tree close to where you found the bird on the ground.

As tempted as you may be, it's best not to feed the baby. Quite often, birds are killed by their well-meaning caretakers either because they are given the wrong type of food (such as giving a

seed-eater an insect or vice versa) or are given liquids improperly (leading to fluid in the lungs).

If hours have gone by and the parent has not yet come to claim the offspring, it may be time to contact a rehabilitator who specializes in birds. Before doing so, warns Shackelford, make sure you're willing to make the commitment to deliver the baby a long distance away. “Remember, [rehabbers are] busy feeding and tending to injured animals around the clock and often can't afford to break away,” he says. It's also important to remember that most rehabbers are working as volunteers “on their own penny” and that a financial donation would be appreciated.

If you need the services of a Texas wildlife rehabilitator, you can find a listing at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hunt/wild/wild/rehab/list/. ★



↑ Fragile as this young mockingbird seems, it probably doesn't need your “help.”

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