

What to Do If You Find a Baby Bird

With spring just around the corner, birds are starting to nest all over the place. Apart from swooping magpies and plovers nesting on school ovals, most people are not aware of baby birds tucked up in their nests until they start to leave of their own accord or have the misfortune to fall out. Windy days and babies in nests don't mix well and there are always lots of unfortunate mishaps. As well, predators sometimes pick babies out of a nest but drop them, some are rejected by their parents, and some just get too clever for their own good. Add storms and pruned trees to the list, and quite a few babies come to grief. For these nestlings, their only hope of survival comes from some human assistance. Sometimes a replacement nest can be provided and hung in the tree the bird has fallen from and the parent birds will continue rearing the chicks. A hanging planter or a small plastic bucket with holes in the bottom for drainage, with nesting material, can do the job. It needs to be firmly hung from a branch where the tree provides some cover. Sometimes this does not work, or there may be other reasons (for example the death of a parent) that babies have to be taken into care.

However, large numbers of babies of many species get picked up by people who think they have fallen from the nest, but in fact they are at the stage where they have left the nest and are being fed and protected by their parents. Dozens of these little "kidnapped" babies are taken to vets or bird carers throughout the summer. Many can be reunited with their parents, but only if we have very specific information about exactly where they were picked up. However, a lot of time and bird family disruption can be saved if you assess the situation before removing the bird. Many birds leave the nest when they are still very small and before they can fly, so it is understandable that people assume they have fallen. If the youngster has its feathers and a short tail and can perch strongly, it will be at the stage where it spends its days perched in a tree, practicing flying between branches, investigating passing insects, berries and flowers, and having food supplied by parents and sometimes extended family. They develop very rapidly and will soon be flying. If the bird looks healthy, is uninjured and alert, perch it up on a nearby branch and move back to watch that the adult birds attend to it. It doesn't usually take long. If it can't perch it is either too young, or injured or sick. These birds generally need to come into care. Don't try to feed the bird, but keeping it warm with a hot water bottle or equivalent is essential. Find a bird carer as soon as possible.

The ability of birds to get themselves out of trouble is sometimes amazing. I remember going to reunite a little butcher bird with its parents one Saturday morning. It had been picked up from the ground in a park the afternoon before, by a boy on his way home from school. His mother dropped it at the local vet and fortunately they got her to contact me. I met the boy and his mother at the park so that he could show me exactly where he picked up the bird. There was a sibling on a branch higher up. I perched the little bird a bit above my head height and walked over to my car to sit and watch. The parents appeared immediately and started bringing insects. Very quickly the little bird fell to the grass and I groaned to myself. However, the adult birds flew down and perched on the trunk of the tree. They called loudly and continuously. The baby hopped straight over to the tree and with his parent's encouragement started climbing up the tree trunk 'till he got back on the branch he had fallen from. I knew immediately why they have such painfully sharp claws!

In a bit of a different situation are all the ground and water birds that are mobile and follow their parents from a day or so old. Ducklings, curlews, plovers, water-hens and the like also often get into trouble. They are much harder to re-unite unless you are absolutely sure that you have the right parents, or they are likely to get attacked sometimes with fatal results. Because they are mobile they can be hard to identify with certainty. I raise heaps of these littlies every summer. Once again, keeping these chicks warm until you can get them to a carer is essential.

Summary

1. Assess the situation: Does the little bird have its feathers? Can it perch? Is it healthy – alert, sitting straight, active? No injuries, blood on feathers etc?
2. If so, perch it on a branch the right size for it to grip, near where it was picked up
3. Move well back and watch for evidence of adults interacting with the baby. The adults may be obvious but may take a few minutes to appear.
4. If it is too young, or sick or injured, it will need to come into care. You can drop it at your local vet without charge, although some are better than others in dealing with wildlife. It is often better to get it to a carer yourself. You can ring the “1300 ANIMAL” number for advice about carers local to you (Queensland). The RSPCA in all states would have appropriate contacts.
5. If you leave the bird with a vet, make sure you leave your name and contact number and information about where the animal was found. It is often very helpful for the carer to be able to talk to the person who found the bird, so leaving your phone number is invaluable. Not all vet staff will ask, so be proactive. For the carer, not having that information can make things a lot more difficult and it may mean that a baby that could be re-united with its family loses that opportunity.
6. If you are pruning vegetation during spring/summer always make very sure there are no nests in the tree or bush before you start cutting.