

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Baby Birds



HAVE YOU FOUND A BABY BIRD?!

Spring has sprung and so have the baby birds!

Spring is always a very busy time for wildlife rescuers, rehabilitators, veterinary clinics and wildlife hospitals. During this time of year, baby birds begin to fledge and venture away from their nests. Unfortunately, most will find their way into veterinary clinics after being "rescued" by well-meaning members of the public. However, not all of these baby birds on the ground require rescuing! Here's what to do when a baby bird is found or brought into your clinic.

It is extremely important to make every attempt possible to "re-nest" or reunite a healthy, uninjured baby bird with its parents.

First you need to correctly identify the bird. In general, there are two types of birds – precocial and altricial. Precocial birds are born covered in down with their eyes open and can feed themselves soon after hatching; they include birds like ducklings, plovers, brush turkeys, and swamphens. These birds usually nest on the ground. Altricial birds are completely dependent on their parents for warmth and food. They are born completely or nearly naked with their eyes closed and must be nursed until they are mature enough to leave the nest. These include the majority of birds such as honeyeaters, insectivores, parrots, pigeons, carnivores and



most raptors. These birds usually nest in trees or off the ground.

Next, determine if the baby bird is suitable to be re-nested. Obviously, if the parents are known to be dead then the baby will need to be taken into care by a trained wildlife rehabilitator. Also, be aware that a sick or injured bird should not be re-nested; instead the baby should be placed in a box or basket, kept warm, in a dark and quiet environment and taken to a vet for exami-



nation. Lastly, naked or near-naked altricial hatchlings do not have sufficient down or feathers for thermoregulation and must be brooded by the parents. If the chick cannot be returned to the original nest, then it will need to be raised by a trained wildlife rehabilitator.

Do not kidnap healthy fledglings. The fledgling stage of development is an important time for baby birds as this is when they learn survival and feeding skills under the watchful eye of their nearby parents. Fledglings have a significant number of adult-looking feathers; they begin to hop and flutter around their surroundings and frequently fall to the ground. These babies do not need to be "rescued" unless they appear to be in danger at which point they should simply be picked up and placed on a nearby branch.

Healthy, uninjured altricial baby nestlings with considerable down or feathers whose parents are nearby are suitable to be re-nested and should be placed in a makeshift

nest. The parents will continue to care for their baby from the new nest and, contrary to popular belief, they will not reject a baby because it has been handled by a human.

Craft a makeshift nest from a bucket (40-50cm deep): drill several holes in the bottom to provide drainage in case of rain, place a layer of leaves and grass in the bottom and place a stick (about 60cm long) in the bucket and secure it into one of the drainage holes. Place the nestling in its new home and hang the bucket in a leafy tree or tall bush, well-protected from direct sun or predators and as close as possible to where the baby was found initially. Observe the makeshift nest from a distance to ensure the parents return to feed it. If the parents do not return within a couple of hours or by dusk, then retrieve the baby and contact a wildlife rehabilitator so that it can be given proper care.

A precocial baby does not need to be placed in a nest. If it appears to be in danger and the parents are still around, place it under the cover of dense bush in a nearby location and observe to ensure the parents rejoin it.



After all, there is no substitution for the care of mum and dad!

A poster is provided on the next page and can be printed out as a reference.

Renée Rivard &
Mimi Dona