

# Orphaned Birds



**Situation:** You've found a young bird you think may be orphaned.

## Why This Happens:

- **Nestling** birds (naked or down-covered baby birds who are too young to be out of their nests) sometimes fall from their nest or their nest blows down and they are found lying on the ground.
- **Fledging** birds (partially or fully feathered birds that are old enough to leave their nests but are too young to fly well and are therefore still under parental care) are sometimes found on the ground and assumed to be orphaned when no parent is seen nearby.

## FAQs & Advice for Humane Intervention:

***"I found a naked (or downy) baby bird on the ground. What should I do?"***

A nestling bird will not survive for long out of its nest. Nestlings are highly dependent on their parents for warmth, food, and protection from the elements and from predators. So, a fallen nestling should ideally be put back into its nest. The exception to this is if the bird is injured. If you see cuts, bruises, abrasions or signs of blood on the baby bird, it is unlikely to survive unless it is brought to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

1. Search for the bird's nest. Some species nest in trees or shrubs, others nest on ledges or on homes or buildings, and others even nest on the ground. Sometimes just one or more nestlings will have fallen from the nest, other times the entire nest is found on the ground. While nest materials vary by species, many birds use dried grasses, fine twigs, and sometimes mud and hair in constructing their nest.



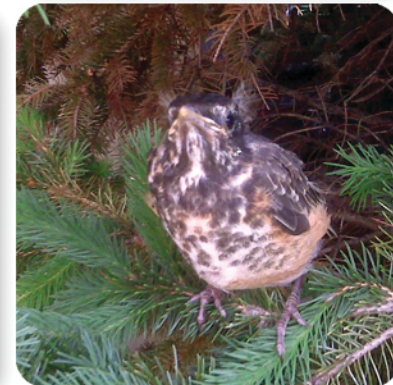
◀ Nestling House Finch

Nestling Mourning Doves ▶



◀ Nestling Northern Cardinal

Fledging American Robin ▶



2. If you've found the nest up on a ledge or branch and you can safely reach it, you should place the baby bird back in the nest. **HOWEVER**, if the baby bird is cool to the touch, he should be *warmed* before being returned to his nest. This can be accomplished by holding him gently in your cupped hands for a few minutes or by partially filling a zip-top plastic bag with very warm (but not hot) water and placing him on top of it. Most birds have little or no sense of smell, so *the parents will not reject the baby* because a human has touched him, but they might reject him if he is cold when put back in the nest.

(Note: some birds or nests can have nest mites, tiny insects about the size of this dot [ · ], that may crawl onto your skin. They can't survive on humans for long, but they may cause minor itching, so be sure to wash your hands and arms with soap and water after you've handled a bird. You may wish to wear vinyl exam gloves or cleaning gloves or put plastic bags on your hands before handling a bird or nest).

3. If the entire nest has fallen down, you can try replacing the nest **AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE** to its original location. If the nest is falling apart or you can't get it to stay up where it belongs, you can place the nest into a plastic cup with holes drilled into the bottom of it (for drainage). The cup gives the nest additional support to hold it together and makes it easier to fasten up in a tree or shrub.

Baby birds returned to the nest should be watched from a distance (so your presence doesn't frighten the adult birds) to make sure the parent(s) are returning to care for them. If their parent(s) haven't returned to feed them after two hours, call your local licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

***"I found a young bird that has feathers, but it still has some downy tufts and looks like it can't fly. What should I do?"***

Fledgling songbirds are mostly or fully feathered young birds that have become too big/old for their nest. They leave the nest before they are able to fly and spend several days learning to fly "from the ground up." They are vulnerable to predator attacks at this time, but the parents continue to feed and defend their young during this stage. *Parent birds may only stop for a few seconds to feed a fledgling before leaving to forage for more food.* So, fledglings may be seen without a parent close by. For this reason, people

Punch or drill small holes into the bottom of the cup. ▶



◀ Place the original nest in the cup.

Attach the nest to the tree using string, wire, or small bungee cords. ▶



◀ Place the babies in the repaired nest.

who find a fledgling mistakenly think that the young bird is orphaned. Before assuming that the bird is orphaned and scooping it up for a trip to a wildlife rehabilitator, *watch to see if the bird is truly orphaned*. The best way to tell if a fledgling is orphaned or not is to watch the bird from a distance, preferably from indoors, where the parent birds can't see you. Watch to see if a parent comes by to feed the fledgling. Remember, it only takes a few seconds for a parent bird to drop by to stuff some food in the fledgling's mouth, so you need to be vigilant. If, after a couple of hours, no parent bird comes to feed the fledgling, call your local licensed wildlife rehabilitator for advice.

(Note: If you feel a fledgling bird you have found is in immediate danger, you may want to move it a short distance – a few feet – and place it in a bush or on a low tree branch to get it out of immediate harm's way).

***“I found a baby duck (or goose) all alone. What should I do?”***

Baby ducks and geese are marched to water from the nest by their mother (in the case of ducks) or by both parents (in the case of geese) soon after hatching. If you find one or more ducklings or goslings without their mother, they'll probably need professional help if they are to survive. Call your local licensed wildlife rehabilitator for help. In Milwaukee County, please call (414) 431-6204 to leave a message for our Wildlife Hospital staff and volunteers.

***“I found a young bird that appears to be injured. What should I do?”***

If the young bird you have found appears to be sick or injured, call your local licensed wildlife rehabilitator for help. In Milwaukee County, call (414) 431-6204 to leave a message for our Wildlife Hospital staff and volunteers. Also see our Injured Birds instruction page at <http://www.wihumane.org/wildlife/injuredbirds.aspx>

***“I found a baby hawk (or owl, or heron) on the ground. What should I do?”***

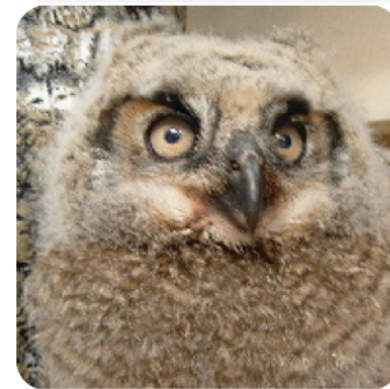
Please call your local licensed wildlife rehabilitator for help. In Milwaukee County, please call (414) 431-6204 to leave a message for our Wildlife Hospital staff. 🐾



◀ Mallard duckling



Canada gosling ▶



◀ Great Horned owl



Fledgling Eastern Bluebirds ▶



© Wisconsin Humane Society 2012.



4500 W. Wisconsin Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53208  
[www.wihumane.org](http://www.wihumane.org)  
[info@wihumane.org](mailto:info@wihumane.org)

*The Wisconsin Humane Society is a charitable organization that depends entirely on donations to fulfill its mission to create a community that values animals and treats them with respect and kindness. Your support for the WHS Wildlife Rehabilitation Center makes possible the distribution of information like this to thousands of people who request it each year, and makes possible the humane care of over 5,000 injured, sick, and orphaned wild animals from our community each year. You may donate online at [www.wihumane.org/donate.aspx](http://www.wihumane.org/donate.aspx) or by mailing a check to the following address:*

*WHS Wildlife Center, 4500 W. Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53208.*