



## Baby birds: when to help

Every summer people come across baby birds that can't fly, bewildered little things that seem lost or abandoned. Almost always, trying to help does more harm than good. Why? Because most young birds we encounter are no longer nestlings, which might actually need help getting back to their nests. Once young birds leave their nests, they are considered fledglings, but that doesn't mean they know how to fly very well. They might look vulnerable, but they are where they are meant to be. Even if you were able to find its nest, as soon as you put the bird back it would likely leave again. Why do youngsters leave their nests before they can fly? Because nests are not the safe havens we imagine them to be. A bunch of tasty babies all in one spot are easily wiped out by one marauding predator, so parents work to get their young out of the nest as quickly as possible, spreading them out and moving them to a different spot each night to enhance each youngster's chance of survival.

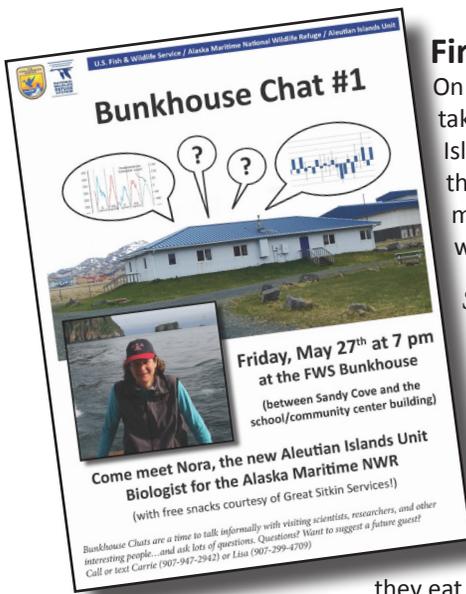
So what should you do when you find a baby bird, all on its own? Well, if it is ugly and unable to hop or perch, then it is a nestling. If you can find the nest (it may be well hidden), put the bird back as quickly as possible. If you can't find it, provide a substitute nest by hollowing out a place in the grass and lining it with moss or dry grasses. Put the baby bird in and leave it alone. As soon as you leave, the parents, which have probably been watching you the whole time, will return and continue feeding their youngster.

If the baby bird is fluffy and cute, has feathers, can hop around and grip your finger, then it is a fledgling. The best thing you can do for these guys is make sure they are out of harm's way. Don't move them far or their parents won't be able to find them to feed them, but do take them out of the middle of a road, and make sure your pets are confined. A fledgling's helpless stage is temporary, and usually within a couple of days it will be strong and capable enough to leave the area.

Please don't try to raise a baby bird yourself. For one thing, it is an incredibly labor-intensive task. Nestlings are ravenous eaters and must be fed every 15-20 minutes from sunrise to sunset. If the young bird is only a day or two old, it may be weeks before it can be released. Most hand-raised birds die, often before they are old enough to be released. Those that don't die are usually unequipped to survive on their own, with no parents to teach them where to look for food, how to avoid predators, how to communicate. Very young birds may imprint on a human caretaker—become irreversibly socially-bonded to humans instead of to its own species. Such birds are unafraid of people, vulnerable, and often permanently dependent on humans for food—a bad situation. One last thought: in addition to being difficult and problematical, raising a wild bird in captivity is also illegal.



Lapland longspur nestlings (top) and fledgling (bottom) (photos courtesy of Laurent Demongin [top] and Lisa Pirie [bottom])



## First Bunkhouse Chat

On 27 May we hosted the first Bunkhouse Chat, where scientists in Adak to meet the R/V *Tiglav* take time out for an informal conversation with interested locals. The Refuge's new Aleutian Islands Unit Biologist answered questions, and Doug Causey told stories while trying to explain the psyche of birders. We also discovered we may have a planter (as opposed to birder) in our midst! And everyone enjoyed some delicious snacks (thanks, Carrie!). For those of you who weren't able to come, Doug provided a brief recap of his current work:

### Seabirds are Monitors of the Ocean Environment

Douglas Causey, Veronica Padula, and Ashley Stanek—all from the University of Alaska Anchorage—have been studying seabird ecology for the past ten years in the central and western Aleutians in collaboration with the Alaska Maritime NWR. North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea waters have been changing over the past decade, probably affected by larger scale alterations in climate, and causing unusual temperatures and weather, affecting current patterns, and making the coastal regions more unpredictable. The Aleutians are located right between the two oceans, and impacted by changes from both sides. The seabirds that breed in the Aleutians act as monitors of these changes by the food that

they eat, the waters they use, and their distributions and abundance throughout the islands. Some species, like red-faced cormorants and red-legged kittiwakes, have changed their distributions and breeding sites, and experienced drastic declines in abundance.

This summer the team will be working out in the far western Aleutians at Attu and Agattu islands, collecting seabirds for a coordinated series of field and laboratory studies designed to investigate how seabirds are reacting to environmental change and increased ship traffic. Using sophisticated genetic and isotopic analysis, they have been able to show that the ecological patterns are becoming more variable and less predictable. Ingestion of microplastics and their chemicals is becoming more common—probably related to increased shipping traffic, but the actual effects are not well known. Other species, like murres and shearwaters, seem to be doing fine in some regions, while other species seem to be increasing. This year's work will be the end of their first phase of research and after analyses done this summer, we will know a lot more about the effects of change in our Aleutian environment and be able to understand better how to plan for the future.



Red-faced cormorants (photo by Greg Thomson/USFWS)

Please call the Refuge's Adak office at 592-2406 if you'd like to be notified of future Bunkhouse Chats. Due to the unpredictability of the *Tiglav's* schedule, there might not always be much advance notice.