

Baby birds: knowing when to help, when to stay away

by Liz Jozwiak

Many of our readers have probably started to see baby birds fluttering around the house and backyard by now. Some of the luckier few have also glimpsed a newborn moose calf or two, or have seen baby snowshoe hares scurrying around.

It's also the time of the year when the Kenai Refuge receives calls from the public about injured or abandoned baby birds and nestlings.

Most songbirds such as the warblers, juncos, thrushes, and sparrows arrive on the Kenai Peninsula to breed by early June. Flycatchers and pewees arrive a few weeks later. These songbirds are also known as "neo-tropical migrants" because they winter as far south as Central and South America, and migrate to Alaska to breed.

All songbirds are born helpless, as are woodpeckers, hawks, owls, crows and ravens. Their eyes are usually still closed, and they have few or no feathers. They are completely dependent upon their parents for warmth and nourishment.

Waterfowl and grouse-type birds, on the other hand, are usually feathered and able to feed themselves within a few days after hatching.

It is our human nature to help a baby bird which looks as though it has fallen out of a nest. The chick either tried leaving the nest prematurely, may have fallen out or was learning to fly. In some cases our help is appropriate, in other cases it is not.

If you find a naked helpless baby bird on the ground, try to locate its nest. It should be close by. Look in heavy brush, hollow tree branches, and in shrubbery. Some birds such as juncos and robins are ground nesters, so the nest may not be in a tree, but on the ground or in shrubs.

Even if you find another nest of the same species with nestlings in it, put the baby there. This is especially successful for swallows, or if the baby is still naked and blind. If the baby bird seems warm and active, put it back in the nest immediately.

Don't worry that because you have touched the chick its parents will abandon both it and the nest. The parent birds may abandon a nest that they are building if it is bothered, but they are not likely to abandon a nest once the eggs have hatched.

If you find a feathered baby bird that is not in a dangerous situation (dogs, cats, roadways), it is best to leave it alone. The parents are probably nearby and will take care of the baby. If there is danger nearby, return the baby to its nest, or at least move it out of harm's way.

If you find a baby duck, shorebird or grouse, try to locate the parents and the rest of the brood. Release the baby nearby and leave the area so that the adults and baby may find each other by calling. These babies are feathered and can feed themselves even if the parents do not find them right away.

The worst-case scenarios are where the parents have been injured or killed, the nest blown down or destroyed, the baby injured, cold, or lethargic. In these situations I suggest calling Cindy Sherlock (262-1459, 252-5103). Cindy is a licensed wildlife rehabilitator in the Kenai-Soldotna area who specializes in baby songbird care.

Well-meaning people bring us a baby birds every spring. Some of these baby birds are cold and weak and need immediate care, but the healthy feathered ones should have been left alone.

While the Kenai Refuge is fortunate to have a network of experienced baby bird rehabilitators, humans nevertheless make poor substitutes for bird parents. If you happen across a small ball of feathers learning to fly, resist the temptation to rescue it. Its parents are probably not too far away.

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