The Care of Nestling and Orphaned Birds

By MURRAY and JANE OLYPHANT

During the spring, many of us find baby birds on the ground that are too young to fly, and are apparently deserted by their parents. Unless there is positive proof that the parent birds are dead or have actually deserted the bird should not be removed from the area. Nine times out of ten the parent birds are nearby.

What to Do

Although a baby bird should seldom be taken into a house, there are a few things that can be done for its safety. Young birds that are hopping about will be safer if placed high in a nearby tree or dense shrubbery. Nestling birds unable or barely able to perch should be returned to the nest. If the nest has been destroyed or cannot be located, a substitute nest can be made, lined with grass, cotton, or other soft material, and securely placed well off the ground in a nearby bush or tree. An Easter egg basket or perhaps a shoe box hung from a rope can be used. When this is done the parent birds will very likely return to the area to care for the nestling, who will usually let himself be known by continual peeping. In any case, remember: baby birds are very nervous and easily injured. Handle gently and as little as possible.

Abandoned Young Birds

In those cases where there is proof that a young bird is permanently abandoned its chances of survival may be improved by caring for it until it can fly. This is no easy job and the mortality rate is high. The original nest or a suitable substitute will be needed. For nestlings the bird and nest should be brought indoors and covered with a lightweight cloth so that air will pass through for breathing. The temperature of the room should be fairly constant between 70-80 degrees, and the nest should be kept out of drafts. For more active birds place the nest in a larger, high-walled box with some branches or twigs for perching. Between feedings cover the box with a lightweight cloth. The cloth serves not only to keep the bird in and retards drafts, but quiets the bird and thereby insures proper rest. Birds are agitated by the sight and sound of humans so the less disturbance the better.

Feeding

During daylight all young birds should be fed every 20 to 30 minutes. Regardless of species, baby birds will usually take one or more of the following items.

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(1) Ground up or very finely chopped 10-minute boiled egg including the shell chopped up and mixed in with the addition of vitamin drops, cod liver oil and small amounts of water to moisten ingredients (this is recommended for all birds).
(2) Finely chopped hamburger.
(3) Pablum mixed with small amount of milk or water to moisten.
(4) Section of earthworm or cut-worm grub.
(5) Small amounts of mealy apple or banana.

If nesting box is rocked slightly, very young birds will open their bills in anticipation of food: in the wild, of course, as the bird lands, the nest is jostled slightly. Possibly because they are frightened, older birds may not open their bills. If this is so, the bill should be very gently opened with finger and toothpick. A good feeding tool is a flat toothpick with food stuck on the end. Small tweezers are also very good.

Never give water or milk to baby birds with an eye dropper. Liquids thus forced on young birds are frequently fatal because of choking or drowning. Only when a bird is old enough to perch on a twig, should it be offered water in a shallow saucer or plate.

Handling

Because of the bird’s unnatural confinement and consequent nervousness, it is very important not to handle or pick it up except when absolutely necessary. If the bird must be picked up, cover its back with the palm of your hand and have its head protruding between the first and second fingers. In this way the thumb and other fingers gently enclose the body and restrain the wings. A small bird’s bones are tiny and fragile and are easily injured or dislocated. In particular avoid pressure on breast and abdomen (belly).

Release

As soon as a young bird can fly slightly, turn it loose to forage for itself. Although parent birds normally teach their young to find food, a young bird has some foraging instincts. However, a bird which has been hand fed too long will generally become very dependent and will probably not be able to take care of itself. If release comes when the bird shows signs of flying, its chance of leading a healthy life in its normal wild state is much increased.

Sick or Injured Adult Birds

Nature is cruel. There is little hope for distressed birds. Leave such birds alone; they may be carrying diseases communicable to man. An injured bird stands some chance in the care of a qualified expert.

What Kind of Bird is It

Identifying baby birds can be very puzzling. Baby birds generally differ markedly from the adults in plumage, shape of bill and other characteristics. Hence, by themselves they can be positively identified only by an experienced ornithologist. Most of us will have to depend on seeing the parent bird for proper identification.

Good references include Roger Tory Peterson’s, A Field Guide to the Birds, and Birds, Golden Nature Guide Series.

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