

Urban Wildlife Issues  
Wildlife Rescue column by Devin Manky  
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## Not all baby birds need rescuing

Many of you will be familiar with Nicky Fried, the previous writer of this wildlife column.

As a nature enthusiast, I always enjoyed reading Nicky's columns and I am honoured to succeed her.

Like Nicky, I write for the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C., where I also work as a wildlife rehabilitator and educator.

When not working, I am an avid birder, nature photographer and licensed bird bander. The Lower Mainland is a great place for these outdoor activities, and springtime is no exception. The arrival of spring has many people seeing young birds swimming or scurrying along behind their parents.



The rescue association's phone line is already ringing off the hook with inquiries about "baby" sightings.

At this time of year, I like to talk about the "birds and the bees"—well maybe not the bees, but I have lots to say about baby birds! Something instinctive in human nature makes us feel obligated to help babies of any species.

Anything with an "awww" factor cries out to us for intervention.

We associate being young with being helpless, and nothing looks more helpless than a teeny bird on the ground all by itself.

But how do we know when we should rescue these little ones?

Most young animals will have times in their life when they really are helpless. Nestling songbirds are born naked with their eyes closed. They are totally reliant on their parents for warmth, food and protection from predators—the big three needs of any wild animal.

When nestlings are found alone on the ground, perhaps from a destroyed nest, something has gone terribly wrong, and they need to be rescued. Habitat destruction is often the result of human activity.

Not too long ago we had a family bring in a tiny nest, with two miniscule baby birds inside.

The nest belonged to a rufous hummingbird and had been cut down during a hedge prune.

Needless to say, the family involved felt horrible and was relieved that the rescue association admitted the orphans.

Not all grounded young birds need us to be heroes.

Although baby animals may appear helpless, most of them are not.

In the bird world, maturing youngsters are called fledglings, and they must learn how to be self-sufficient adults. Juveniles learn from experience. After the critical early stages of life, the young venture out to explore.

During this time they are exposed to potential dangers such as predators, long falls, and human related activities like vehicle traffic—such risks are part of growing up.

While exploring on the ground, fledgling birds learn where to find food and begin to recognize the signs and sounds of danger.

Parents can be observed nearby, often giving a warning call that predators are around or encouraging the youngster towards a good source of food.

A human equivalent might be telling your children not to talk to strangers, to look both ways before crossing the street, or to eat their vegetables!

Caring individuals often think these grounded fledglings need rescuing and mistakenly bring them to our rehabilitation facility. At the wildlife rescue association, we call this practice “bird-napping.”

Often the rescue association asks rescuers to return the fledglings to the location where they were found.

Humans can never fully replace the parents’ care.

Skilled rehabilitators can feed and accommodate orphaned animals, treat injuries, and provide flight space as fledgling birds develop into adults.

However, we cannot show these young animals the subtle clues that a predator is stalking them, or teach them how to communicate with their own species.

When you are considering whether to rescue a grounded bird, I urge you to assess the entire situation before taking action.

Is the animal uninjured? Are adults around? Is cover nearby?

If the answers to these questions are ‘yes’, then you may want to wait, watch and witness nature unfold.

If the parents do not return within two or three hours, call the rescue association for advice.

The bird may be orphaned or injured and require help.

Rescuing a helpless baby bird is a kind act, but leaving an uninjured fledgling with its parents can be kinder still!