

Know when not to interfere with animals

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Spring has sprung (it's about time!), and every living thing is blooming or growing or ripening ... or procreating. It's baby season - you may have noticed your alarm clock has been trumped by baby robins these days, starting at about 4 a.m. - and hatchlings everywhere are competing for food and space and struggling to survive.

Little ones fall from nests, suffer injuries and are left orphaned by predators. The Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C., where I have been a volunteer for the past seven years, accepts more than two-thirds of its 3,000-plus annual patient admissions during the spring and summer months. For them, it's not just baby season; it's busy season.

I had been cautioned many times in my life never to touch a baby bird because my scent would cause the parents to reject it. But as a volunteer at Wildlife Rescue, I had learned that simply wasn't true of birds. (Before touching any baby mammal, however, call Wildlife Rescue for advice and instructions).

So I gently scooped the tiny creature into my hands while David lined a small cardboard box with a soft cloth and made air holes with a pencil. I lifted the bird into the box, covered the box with another cloth, then placed it in a warm, dark and quiet spot in the house, well out of reach of the cat. We reconvened on the back porch to strategize our next move.

Many of the baby birds brought to Wildlife Rescue are given a second chance at life through the care they receive from staff and volunteers. "Busy season" is a juggling act of dawn-to-dusk feedings of nestlings, fledglings, ducklings and goslings - every 15 minutes all day for the youngest, and then every 30, 45 or 90 as they mature.

Sadly, though, not all babies brought to the centre need rescuing but have been scooped up by well-meaning passersby who didn't realize the bird was learning to fly or find food. Wild bird babies are best raised by their parents, so learning to recognize what's happening can mean the difference between life and death.

Wildlife Rescue provides clear directions on their website for anyone interested in assisting baby birds or rescuing other wild animals in distress (www.wildliferescue.ca/todo.shtml). With nestlings, if you can find the nest, return the baby to it and then watch for the parents. If they do not return within two hours, the baby may be orphaned, and it's time to call Wildlife Rescue for the next steps, 604-526-7275.

If you find a fledgling - out of the nest, well-feathered and able to stand and hop - and see the parent nearby, leave the baby alone and keep the area safe from cats and other predators. If the parents are missing and don't return within two hours, contact Wildlife Rescue.

If the bird is injured, bleeding, limping or unconscious, gently contain it and get it to help as quickly as possible. Stress kills, and time is of the essence. Most importantly, don't talk to the animal, and don't try to treat it yourself. Professional wildlife rehabilitators are trained to give it the best care possible and the best chance at surviving to be released back to the wild.

I was just beginning to think I was stuck with a little overnight guest and an early-morning trip to the wildlife centre when David held up his hand and motioned for me to listen. There, in the beech nut tree not too far from where we'd found the baby bird - the sound of another bird calling loudly, frantically, as though she'd lost the most important thing in the world.

Retrieving the box with its precious cargo, we made our way to the base of the tree, braving the attack calls and dive-bombing of a fierce mother robin. David climbed into the tree and I held the open box aloft. Quickly, he lifted the baby back into its nest, and then both of us retreated to a safe distance to see what would happen.

The attack calls and the dive-bombing stopped, and in the silence came a tiny cheeping sound: a hungry baby bird calling to its mother for food.

Diane Haynes is the author of Jane Ray's Wildlife Rescue Series for teens (www.wildliferescueseries.com).

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