

Now that spring is here, many people wonder what they should do when they see a baby bird on the ground. Their immediate concern is that it has been lost or abandoned, but in reality the parents are usually close by and watching over it. Generally, the best answer to the question of what to do if you find an animal baby is nothing – unless there are special circumstances such as a dead parent nearby, observable injuries, evidence of a destroyed nest, or an imminent threat to a baby such as a dog, cat, or a car. Most songbirds leave the nest (fledge) while still under the supervision of their parents and spend several days or weeks being fed and learning survival skills. They may look helpless and are certainly not yet self-sufficient, but they are usually not abandoned, and if left alone by humans they will have the best chance of surviving to adulthood with their parents' care.

Even if a baby bird has fallen from its nest, or if an entire nest blows from a tree during a storm, as long as there does not appear to be injury, the best thing to do is put it back – or at least as close as possible to where it was – and keep the kids and dog well away so the parents can continue taking care of it. If the baby is hopping around or fluttering from place to place on the ground, leave it alone – chances are very good the parents are nearby, waiting for you to leave so they can herd it to safety. If a bird is clearly too young to have left the nest – if its eyes are not opened and it is not fully feathered, for example, a small plastic tub lined with tissue can be secured at a safe height close to where the baby was found and the parents will continue to take care of it. Adult birds will not reject a baby just because it has been handled by a human; scent is a much bigger issue where mammals are involved (for questions about baby mammals, see phone numbers below). The biggest reason to avoid handling baby animals of any kind is the risk of injuring them inadvertently.

If you are sure a baby bird needs help beyond replacing it in the nest:

Do not attempt to take care of it yourself! Why not, legally speaking? Federal and state laws prohibit anyone but a licensed wildlife rehabilitator from possessing birds native to the U.S., and only three species are not included under these laws. They are the House (English) Sparrow, European Starling, and Rock Dove (common pigeon).

So why not, nutritionally speaking? Songbirds have very specialized dietary requirements that are difficult to meet with human dietary ingredients. They must be fed three or four times an hour from dawn to dusk as hatchlings and can be very vulnerable to choking if proper feeding techniques are not used.

What you should do: Call a wildlife rehabilitation organization immediately and do not attempt to give food or water to the animal. In the Lawrence area, call Prairie Park Nature Center at 832-7980 (affiliated with Stone Nature Center in Topeka) or Operation Wildlife at 542-3625. In the Topeka area, call the Stone Nature Center hotline at 785-575-1991. For information via e-mail, contact Karyn Riney, a Stone Nature Center volunteer, at kbriney@ku.edu.