

How do I manage baby birds?

“to bucket, or not to bucket: that is the question”

You are a receptionist, Veterinary nurse or Veterinarian and have just been presented with a baby bird and are wondering what actions to take; the following article I hope will assist you on baby bird management.

South-east Queensland is home to more than 370 species of birds. The following hints will help you to recognise the basic fundamentals of the bird that has come into your clinic. On admission if you do not know what it is or what to do with it, be honest with the donor and encourage them to take it to their closest wildlife hospital or wildlife care group for advice (provided it is not injured).

Firstly it is important to remember that a bird would only be caught if it was:

- sick
- injured
- a young bird
- a pet bird
- humanised
- healthy and the catcher is utterly exhausted!

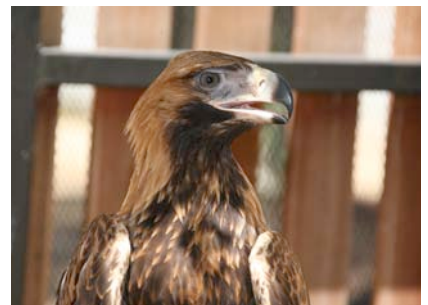
If your clinic has been presented with a bird, take the time to look closely and complete a thorough assessment. Adult birds are generally not presented if they are healthy.

Immature birds come in all shapes and sizes - how would you know if it's a baby bird?

- The characteristic gaping and begging for food
- Either covered in downy feathers or is naked
- Tail (retrices) or wing (remiges) feathers may not be completely out of their shaft

For correct identification consult with your local wildlife veterinary hospitals, wildlife carer groups, identification guides/keys or bird veterinarians. This process gets easier with repetition and by putting in a bit of effort to learn your local species.

This wedge tail eagle is still an immature bird, not all big birds are adults. Its survival is still dependent on its parents who are teaching it how to hunt; it cannot yet survive without them. If this eagle was prematurely separated from its parents by a mistimed or incorrect release post-veterinary exam it could be detrimental to its survival.



This is a variegated fairy wren, it has just fledged and needs to be put back where it's from. Small bird species can be confused as being juveniles. Close inspection of their feather development and a flight test can assist in differentiating age.

Will their feeding response and behavior help with identification?

The way a bird sits gaping for food and their nest appearance may help to exclude certain group species making species identification easier.

- Chicks from enclosed nests or hollows arrange themselves to face the same direction and gape horizontally for food.

Hollow (enclosed) nest species = Kingfishers, Pardalotes, Rainbow Lorikeets, Welcome Swallows.



•Chicks from cup nests arrange themselves more randomly and gape vertically for food.

Open nest species = Magpie Larks, Blue Faced Honeyeaters, Australian Magpies, Kestrels.



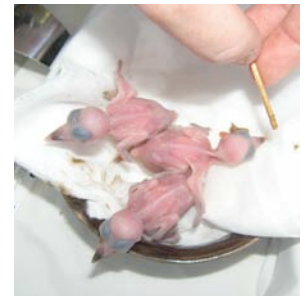
Altricial or Precocial?

These are types of egg laying strategies and are imperative to know as they result in different strategies when reuniting with their parents.



Precocial birds are born covered in down with their eyes open and can feed themselves soon after hatching; they include birds like ducklings, plovers, brush turkeys, and swamphens. These birds do not like high-rise living and usually nest on the ground.

Altricial birds are completely dependent on their parents for warmth and food. They are born completely or nearly naked with their eyes closed and must be nursed until they are mature enough to leave the nest. These include the majority of birds such as honeyeaters, insectivores, parrots, pigeons, carnivores and most raptors. These birds usually nest in trees or off the ground.



What stage of development are the feathers at?

As the baby grows, feathers begin to form in the follicles and they can be seen under the skin as darkened areas. As the feathers begin to protrude through the skin, they are encased in a sheath, and some feathers will be tipped by the fuzzy down feather that preceded it.



Can naked fledglings be reunited?

Basically, naked fledglings are unable to thermoregulate their body temperature. If the donor has seen mum on other chicks but cannot reach the nest, unfortunately re-homing will not be possible as mum or dad cannot be in two places at once and the baby bird will need to be hand raised. If attempting to reunite the fledgling with its parents it will need warmth, feeding and the knowledge of how long to persevere with the process. If the donor found the nest on the ground it can be re-hung or a make shift nest can be built ensuring mum can fit and the nest is stable. Watch closely and if the parents have not accepted it after a few hours it will need to be tended to. This step can be repeated several times but at some point a decision will need to be made whether or not to hand raise it.

Can hollow (enclosed) nest fledglings be placed in an open bucket?

Placing hollow nest species in an open makeshift nest should still be attempted, as long as they are self-regulating their body temperature. The smaller the bird the faster the metabolic rate and greater the heat loss meaning they cannot withstand long periods of time without warmth and food - every minute counts. Last spring we removed some Pale-headed Rosellas from the drainpipe of a house and relocated them to a bucket as they would undoubtedly drown when it rained next. Usually, they use hollow logs to nest, however the parental bond was so strong they adapted and raised the young in an open bucket. The house-owner feared the fledglings would be injured when they fledged as the property was not fenced and located on a busy street. So we moved the bucket around to the back of the house over several days. The parents moved with them until they fledged.

Ok so back to the baby bird sitting in your hand – ask the donor to take a seat and fill out a form. It is very important to determine **exactly** where the bird came from. Did they notice any adult birds around and can they identify them? Did they see the parents get killed? Did they see a nest in the tree or on the ground? Let them know this may be a 'birdnapped' bird and although their intentions were great, it may be a case of just returning it back to its home and its parents.

Lets pretend it is not injured or sick and is covered in down and pin feathers. Start pointing to the baby bird poster and the sample makeshift nest displayed in your clinic, The concerned persons are probably telling you that the bird will surely be killed as there are lots of dogs, crows, cars and cats around. Although this is sometimes the sad truth, it is nature and we should assist this bird but not interfere too much. I watched a swan in a lake for two years lose all her chicks to the local eels. I could have saved them every year, hand-raising and teaching them the best I could to be a swan but instead I watched nature take its course and sure enough the third year she moved to a neighbouring lake and reared two chicks successfully. This adaptive performance may have transferred to her young behaviourally or via her genetics to help the survival of her species within semi suburban environments. If she never moved and I continued to raise her young what effects would I be having on her species?

Need a reminder on how to make a new home?

4 EASY STEPS TO MAKING A NEW HOME

1. If the bird is really young and has soft and fluffy down instead of feathers and you are not able to place it in its original nest, then you need to make a new home using a bucket, (approx 40 - 50 cm deep) with holes punched in the bottom for drainage.
2. Put in a layer of soft leaves or grass. Place a stick (about 60 cm long) in the bucket and secure it into one of the drainage holes, so the parents and baby bird can get in and out.
3. Hang bucket head height in a leafy protected area, away from direct sunlight and as close as possible to where you found it. Mum and Dad do not mind if we are in a different tree or if the baby has been handled by a human.
4. Watch from a distance to make sure the parents return to feed the baby. If the new home is disturbed, this may take hours. If the parents do not return by dark, we will need to go into care.

The infographic includes four numbered images: 1. A blue bucket with several small holes punched in the bottom. 2. A blue bucket containing a layer of soft leaves and a long stick inserted through one of the holes. 3. A blue bucket hanging from a tree branch in a leafy area. 4. A blue bucket hanging from a tree branch with a bird perched on the stick inside.

When reuniting the following things should be considered:

Nocturnal or diurnal?

It is important to establish what species you have, does it eat during the day; diurnal, or at night; nocturnal. A nocturnal parent will not come and look after their young during the day.

What if a tree is cut down or is really close to danger such as a road?

The nest can be moved to a neighboring tree as mum and dad have a very strong parental bond and if they want to raise it they will.

What if I don't have a bucket?

You can use anything, providing you follow the basic principles. It must have holes for drainage, position in a leafy protected spot, have a stick for perching and one it can use to get out of the bucket or mum to use to stand on when feeding. People use ice cream containers, hanging pots, old nests; they are all fine.

Can you still use a bucket if it is a fledgling?

If an animal has fledged it no longer needs a nest. I still tend to give the donors a bucket nest as it provides the baby bird somewhere to sit on the way back to their home instead of the donor's kids hands. I ask them to cover it with a towel on the journey and remember they have great sight and vision so keep it dark and quiet. If the journey has been stressful it gives the baby bird a moment to calm down and consider its next move. The bucket is also a tangible item for the donor who obviously has a passion for animals and wants to provide the fledgling with temporary home to make them feel secure.

What stage of development is the baby bird at?

Stage of development can determine how often mum or dad will feed the young. A fledgling Tawny frogmouth is only fed twice throughout the night. I watched one feed her young at 11 pm and again at 3 am. It is important to be aware of this when reuniting. A large carnivorous bird will have longer time intervals between feeds compared to a small nectivorous bird and may require a few people on shifts to confirm it is being looked after. Another technique is to check the faeces produced in the makeshift nest, this should give you an indication of the quantity being fed.



The Egg

- This stage is still viable depending on time left without warmth, method of collection and incubation period.
- To collect the egg - handle so it does not move direction, place in an egg carton with sand or something to stabilise it on, provide warmth and take it to the closest incubator.



The Hatchling

- They are blind and naked (or near naked) and confined to the nest, hatching in a primitive state with semi-transparent skin.
- It is unable to thermo-regulate and must be brooded by the parents for warmth.
- It gapes in response to movement.



Nestling

- Still live in the nest relying on the parents for survival, they start becoming increasingly more active and vocal, gaping when they see food.
- Pin feathers begin to poke through the skin and the chick begins to thermo-regulate as its feathers develop.
- Towards the end of this period it may begin to perch on the side of the nest.



Branchling

- The bird begins to perch away from the nest, exploring the branch and sometimes falling, leaving mum or dad to raise it on the ground.
- Depending on species this stage can be over a period of days or weeks.
- Time interval between feeds is lengthened.



Fledgling

- Primary feathering is significant.
- Parents are still involved at this stage of development, usually in a nearby tree.
- Most likely time for 'birdnapping'. These birds appear injured as they take their first flights spending a lot of time on the ground during this process. Mum and dad finish the education at ground level with some species or call from the neighbouring trees encouraging them to fly.
- If in danger place on a nearby branch but be prepared they will fall again ... the typical avian teenager.

What if the bird is injured?

So if the bird is actually injured, determine all relevant information then admit the bird. Here are two design examples for setting up a baby bird in a vet clinic.

1. If it is able to fly, place a few air holes in a cardboard box away from the bird's eye line. Make a perch by placing a stick through the box or using a rolled up towel then close the lid. You can provide heat by sitting the box on a heat pad, bear hugger or by directing a lamp towards the box.



2. If it is unable to fly or unable to thermo regulate, place a towel onto a bowl, push down the middle and place the baby bird in it, broken sticks can provide perching. Use a feather duster to rest over the top making it feel secure. Warmth can be given by a hot water bottle, heat lamp, humidicrib, brooder or heat pad. A thermostat should be used to help keep the ideal temperature. If needed this can then be placed inside a box and the lid closed.



3. A bird's core body temperature is 40 – 42 degrees. They should feel warm to touch.
4. MOST IMPORTANTLY - set them up in another room away from people, dogs and cats ... their predators. How would you like to recover next to a polar bear?

Some baby birds will not survive a thorough assessment straight away and will require some time out and heat therapy. After a thorough examination, treatment and subcutaneous fluid therapy if required organise to place it into care with a licensed wildlife carer. The wildlife carer needs a Permit and will work within the Queensland Nature Conservation Act 1992. The legislation only allows non-permit holding people to house the animals for 72 hours.

To find out more about this legislation log onto www.epa.qld.gov.au or contact a local wildlife group to become a carer.

What if the veterinary exam yields no apparent problems aside from the bird is just cold and hungry?

Sometimes the baby bird will perk up post warmth and fluids, especially if it has been transported for a long period of time and/or is stressed. If no problems can be found, preferentially a carer should be involved rather than the member of the public and the process of reuniting with the parents commenced. The carer will have the experience to nurse it and then reunite it once it is strong and chirping for its next feed.

Does nature know best?

It would seem that birds have an amazing sense of knowing when to and when not to raise their young. They do this also to protect their other young by evicting from the nest those who are diseased, maimed, or in other ways "different". We can help some young chicks with certain diseases or parasitic burdens but we cannot help a youngster with a genetic defect. I have seen chicks rejected and it is often not until 6 or 7 weeks of age that they start to show poor quality feathers, deformities etc. The parents' objective is to bring into the world genetically able-bodied animals as any bird with an obvious weakness will be shunned or attacked in the wild.

Will they be accepted back?

Be decisive in your treatment and follow up. Some birds have a social flock that will reaccept them after rehabilitation and continue with their parental duties. It is always worth attempting.

Last year I removed three Collared Sparrow-hawks from their habitat as one had fractured its femur on its first attempt to fly; they have legs like supermodels, and were from a very high nest. They were all brought in to reduce any imprinting, the



leg was pinned and after several weeks of rehabilitation and some time in the flight aviary they were all released together. It was amazing to see how knowledgeable they were of the area, hunting straight away. These birds had spent weeks observing from their nest; acquiring a sketch of their parents, close relatives, sounds when the local prey species were around and sampling the local culinary delights. These skills are difficult to teach a bird when it is hand raised and released in a new area.

Fact or myth?

Parents will reject the baby bird if humans handle it is a myth, as birds do not have a highly developed sense of smell.

History of the project in southeast Queensland

In 2008 the baby bird problem became so pressing it prompted a movement dedicated to reuniting healthy chicks and parents, aptly named 'The Baby Bird Brigade'.

"It was not until I started working at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and saw the sheer numbers of them coming through the door in spring that I realised that our actions could be altering the balance of nature. In private practice you only see the ones your clinic is admitting and the full scale of the problem is not apparent". Said Ms Dona

This campaign is the initiative of both Mimi Dona, Senior Vet Nurse at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and Renee Rivard of Wildcare Australia Inc.

With the support of the local wildlife carer group Wildcare, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, RSPCA QLD and the Australian Wildlife Hospital joined forces to try and minimise the amount of kidnapped baby birds every spring, alleviating the time and effort vet clinics spent dealing with baby birds and maximizing the effort of wildlife rehabilitators.

With the help of Provet Qld, rescue packs were delivered to 400 Veterinary clinics in South-east Queensland.

The rescue packs contain a step-by-step guide to baby bird rescue that consists of a poster, a bucket, a brochure and a sticker with all the supporting organisations' contact numbers. The buckets are donated by Bunnings, Burleigh Heads.

In 2007 the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary community hospital admitted 2322 birds and 41% of these were orphans. In 2008 with the help of this simple campaign there was a very positive impact on the number of baby birds reunited with their parents. Of the 3071 birds admitted the number of orphans reduced to 12 %.

How do you start a baby bird brigade in your area?

Want to start a baby bird management in your area, here's some steps to help you.

1. Get a few organisations together; a carers group and local wildlife hospitals. You will need to have recognised groups to give the project strength.
2. Get help from your local veterinary supply company to distribute your Baby Bird Rescue Packs via their sales representatives.
3. Contact your local hardware store to donate buckets.
4. Work out a clean up program at the end of spring so buckets are returned and recycled.



Interested in a poster for your clinic, you can download one from www.cws.org.au, click on the wildlife hospital tab.

Any questions regarding this campaign contact Mimi Dona at vets@cws.org.au

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