

# What to do with an Orphaned or Injured Bird

By Anne Muraski



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831-373-2631 Monterey  
831-422-4721 Salinas  
[www.spcamc.org](http://www.spcamc.org)

#### Animal Rescue

831-373-2631 ext. 0  
After hours 831-646-5534

#### Humane Investigations

831-373-2631 ext. 213/4

#### Wildlife Center

831-373-2631 ext. 227

#### Volunteer

831-373-2631 ext. 223

The Wildlife Center of The SPCA of Monterey County is the only facility that rescues and rehabilitate our area's injured and orphaned wildlife, most of which are victims of human intervention. Wildlife services are supported solely by the generosity of members and donors.

#### Sources for deterrents and scare devices

Gardening or hardware stores carry the products that will deter but not harm wildlife. Call the SPCA Wildlife Center at 831-373-2631 ext. 227 for more information.

#### Recommended reading

*Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife*  
The Humane Society of the United States, 1997, Fulcrum Publishing.  
To order, call 202-452-1100 or visit [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)

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**Wild babies have the best chance of survival with their parents. If you find a nestling on the ground you should try to return it to the nest. It is a myth that birds will reject young handled by humans.**

During the spring baby season, the SPCA receives hundreds of birds at the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center. Almost one third of all the Center's patients are injured and orphaned songbirds. We need your help! You can make a difference by knowing what to do when you encounter a bird. You can also volunteer to be a baby bird feeder by calling 831-373-2631 ext. 223.

#### Nestling on the ground

If you find a naked or near-naked (just pin feathers) nestling on the ground, you should try to return it to the nest. It is a myth that birds will reject young handled by humans. Make sure the nestmates look the same as the one you are replacing.

If you cannot find the nest or it is inaccessible, you can fashion a temporary one with a small box, a margarine tub, or a cut-down milk carton (avoid berry baskets – birds can tangle their legs in them). Punch holes in the bottom of the container for drainage. Fill it with soft bedding material and fasten it to a tree or another high place safe from predators.

If you find a nest on the ground containing babies or eggs, return it to a nearby tree or put the nest in a small box or basket to help secure it. Watch the nest from a distance to confirm that the parents return to feed the young – this could take several hours.

## **Fledgling on the ground**

If you find a juvenile bird on the ground that has feathers, is mobile, but cannot fly up except to low branches, it may be one of many species (scrub jays, crows) whose fledglings spend weeks on the ground learning to fly. During this time, young are still fed and protected by a parent, who will either be protesting your presence or will appear if you leave the area and observe from a distance.

If a nearby nest has similarly developed fledglings inside, you can try returning the bird to the nest, but often it will fly out again. The only times that a fledgling needs rescue is if the bird appears sick (is immobile with puffed up feathers or has an obvious injury), or is in imminent danger from neighborhood cats.

If you see a cat stalking a bird, chase it away, spray it lightly with a hose, or use a pump sprayer on the “stream” setting. You can protect a bird quickly by covering it with a box or wastebasket.

Cat-caught birds should always be brought to the SPCA Wildlife Center; puncture wounds are hard to detect and birds need antibiotics to survive them. If you know the cat’s owner, give him or her our cat predation educational worksheet: *Do Our Pets Hurt Wildlife?*

If an injured fledgling or adult runs away, you may throw a light towel over it to aid in capture. Place the bird in a covered box on some soft cloths or tissue (grass may be too wet). Minimum contact reduces stress and increases any animal’s chance of survival.

Do not handle the bird or keep checking on him. Do not put any rescued animal in a cage where they can see you – cover them at all times. Keep all rescued wildlife dark, warm, quiet, and away from pets and children.

Songbirds feed their young every 15-30 minutes, so time is of the essence. You can help by bringing the bird to the SPCA Wildlife Center as soon as possible.

While the SPCA Wildlife Rescue is always on-call, there are one or two officers to respond to all emergencies throughout Monterey County. They must triage dozens of call, and if they are handling a deer hit by a car or other emergencies, it may be hours before they arrive. That’s why it’s important to capture and contain the bird for pick-up. At the very least, cover the bird with a weighted box or trash can, or corral it into the garage or other enclosure so the animal is still there when rescue workers arrive.

## **Birds hitting windows**

This usually occurs with large picture windows when the bird can see through part of the building to the yard beyond, or when houseplants are inside near the window.

Make the window more visible by closing shades or affixing decals or strips of masking tape to the glass. Sometime a bird will repeatedly peck or fly into windows when it sees its own reflection; this usually occurs during nesting season. To remove the reflection, place a bright light inside near the glass or temporarily cover the glass with a sheet.

If a bird is grounded after striking your window, put it in a covered box lined with a soft cloth and keep it dark, warm, and quiet. If it doesn’t recover in a few hours, bring it to the SPCA Wildlife Rescue or call **831-373-2631 ext. 0** for help.

## **Short-term care of birds**

The sooner the bird is delivered to the SPCA Wildlife Center, the better its chances of survival. These instructions should be followed only when the bird cannot be transported within a couple hours.

If the bird is lethargic and puffed up, it may be cold. Follow these steps:

### **Warm the bird**

1. In its box, place a hot water bottle or heating pad dialed to a low setting.
2. Provide some soft layers between the heat source and the bird, and allow space for the bird to move away from the heat source if it chooses.

## How to prevent injuries and orphans

**Do not trim trees during the April-September baby bird season.** All native bird species are protected by federal law, and that includes nests with eggs or babies.

**Be sure bird feeds are inaccessible to climbing cats.** Locate feeds away from brush that might provide cover. Don't feed birds on the ground. If cats threaten your feeder, wrap a 2-3 foot-wide piece of metal sheeting or other barrier around the tree trunk at approximately 4-6 feet off the ground to prevent climbing.

**Never remove young birds from a nest.** All wild mothers leave their young for periods of time to forage, and an unguarded nest is not necessarily abandoned. You may be keeping adults away with your presence. Observe from a distance and if an adult doesn't appear within two hours, call the SPCS Wildlife Rescue.

**Keep cats indoors.** For the safety of cats and wildlife, keep cats indoors, especially during the April-September baby season. Cats are domestic, introduced species and are not part of any natural ecosystem; their local populations can vastly outnumber all wild predators combined. Most cat predation occurs at dawn and dusk when wildlife is most active, so confining your cats at night is especially important.

If part of your yard has habitat value, do not let it become a "bait station." Enclose the area with a low-cost floppy chicken wire or roll-up fence. Angle the top of the fence slightly outward and felines won't climb the unstable structure. This is a good temporary solution to exclude cats from an area where adults are feeding fledglings on the ground, or to protect a bush or tree that contains nests.

See the *Do Our Pets Hurt Wildlife?* education sheet for more solutions, and share the sheet with your cat-loving neighbors.

**Never try to care for a bird or any wild animal yourself.** It is illegal to possess wildlife without a permit, and baby birds need to be fed every 15-30 minutes from dawn until dusk.

All animals have special food requirements, especially developing young – even a day or two of the wrong diet can permanently damage bones or

tissue. Different species may require nectar, larvae, or certain insects and seeds. Also, diets change as an animal matures.

Birds raised at the SPCA Wildlife Center also benefit from the company of other orphans of their own species. If you raise a baby bird alone, it may not be able to survive in the wild. If you are able to capture a wild animal, it probably needs medical attention to survive.

**Never, ever, use poisons of any kind.** Toxins continue to kill in the food web. Poisoned birds and rodents are eaten by raptors, predators, and pets who then die and are eaten by scavengers. Backyard pesticides are toxic and kill worms, insects, amphibians, and most food sources that native and migratory birds depend on for survival.

**Never use glueboards or sticky substances.** Glueboards and stick substances (polybutenes) are marketed to trap rodents or discourage birds and squirrels from climbing or roosting. Use may result in violations of the [Federal Migratory Bird Act](#) or state humane laws. These products cause prolonged agony – many exposed animals who have arrived at the Center have had to be euthanized.

## Wrap-up

**If you find a baby bird, take time to observe.**

***Is the bird active and alert? Is a parent nearby?***

Then it's probably best to leave this bird alone, unless cats are threatening it.

***Is the bird puffed up and unwilling to move?***

This bird may be injured and should be examined at the SPCA Wildlife Center.

***Is the bird naked?***

This bird is too young to survive on its own and probably fell from a nearby nest. Return it to the nest or call the SPCA Wildlife Center.

***Has the bird been lying in the sun?***

This bird probably needs fluids. Bring it into the SPCA Wildlife Center.

***Was the bird swatted by a cat?***

All cat-caught birds need antibiotics in order to survive. Bring it into the SPCA Wildlife Center.

Common sense will help you make a decision on whether to return the bird to a nest, leave it alone, or deliver it to the Wildlife Center. When in doubt, call the Wildlife Rescue hotline at **831-373-2631 ext. 0.**