

# Orphaned Baby Birds – FACT SHEET



## Long Grass Nature Refuge

605 Spinach Creek Rd, Fordsdale via Gatton Qld 4343

If you need assistance with native wildlife call **(07) 4697 5122**

This fact sheet contains information sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research

## So you've found an orphaned baby bird... Now what?

Well, here's the good news: Over 75% of young birds that are rescued by well intentioned people are in fact not orphans at all, are being well cared for, and don't actually need anyone's help. Most of the time, the best thing you can do for a baby bird is simply to leave it alone. If you spot one, watch it for a while without intervening. Wildlife's natural parents are always better at caring for them than human foster parents. Quite simply, a wild animal's chance of survival is greatly increased when left in its natural environment. Having said that, what about the 25% of babies that are orphans?



Fledgling Kookaburra Chick  
Photo: Doug & Sandy Marker

When you find a baby bird, before making any decision to intervene, the first thing you have to do is decide which of the following situations we're dealing with:

### Altricial or Precocial - it does make a difference

There are two types of baby bird: Altricial and Precocial

Altricial young at hatching are completely helpless, usually naked, have their eyes closed and are totally dependent on the parents for food and care. They are hatched in well-constructed nests built by their parents, usually in trees, bushes or shrubs, and are called nestlings. Examples of altricial birds are magpies, wrens, crows, doves, honeyeaters, eagles, owls, and lorikeets. Nestlings grow quickly, very quickly, become feathered and, depending on their species, leave the nest in two to four weeks. (Most altricial birds are the same size, sometimes bigger, than their parents in this very short space of time). When they leave the nest, the young are called fledglings. Most fledglings are still tended and fed by their parents (even on the ground) for a short period of time until they become completely independent.

Precocial birds on the other hand, are much more developed at hatching. They are covered with down feathers, have their eyes open, and are able to run about (or swim) soon after hatching, and can feed themselves at an early stage. Precocial birds grow much more slowly than their altricial cousins (which tends to make them look cute and helpless), fledging at only a fraction the size of their parents. Precocial chicks are usually hatched in nests on the ground and remain with their parents until self-sufficient. Examples of precocial birds are emus, ducks, lapwings, gulls, geese, brush turkeys, and many wading shorebirds. Many Precocial chicks are mistakenly picked up by well meaning people thinking they are helpless, and abandoned, which as you can see is not the case.

### 1. Fully feathered - (Unhurt): (Fledgling - See photo above)

Fledglings (21 - 56 days) are fully feathered all over, and have no exposed skin. They are fully able to perch, if altricial, and will be experimenting with flight. If the baby bird is fully feathered and hopping around, it will

usually be no more than 2 - 5 days away from flying. At this age, birds often jump or tumble out of the nest. The mother will continue to protect and feed it on the ground while it learns to use its wings. This is completely normal (junior is just growing up). These 'fledgers' are bouncy and cautious of humans, (they see us as predators), and although unable to fly, they are often not that easy to catch.

If the parents are still feeding or calling to it, either; DO NOTHING, or perch the bird in a heavy shrub or low tree. You may want to make a small, secure twig pile that the baby can hop into for protection. ALL pets and children should be kept clear of this area until the baby is flying. Observe from a distance for no more than 2 hours. If the mother doesn't appear within this time, or if you're sure she's dead, phone for advice on what to do next.

At this point it is worth dispelling an 'old wives tale':

### **Mother birds do not abandon their young because they can smell you on them...**

You can handle a baby bird and the parents will almost always come back and take care of it. Birds in general have a very poorly developed sense of smell, (one notable exception being the Egyptian Vulture), they will not mind that you have handled baby. The parental bond is very strong, and the parents will continue to care for their young.

### **Mother birds will abandon their young if you constantly disturb the nest or baby...**

## **2. Partially Feathered: - (unhurt)**

Partially feathered young (10 - 28 days) have still got some exposed skin, particularly on the belly. They may still have a mixture of down and pin feathers, but will also have a good covering of true feathers, particularly on their backs, wings, and tail. Depending on age, they may be able to perch if altricial.

Either return to original nest (if safe to do so), or make an artificial one using an old ice cream container, (with some drainage holes so baby doesn't drown if it rains) hanging planter, or wicker basket lined with soft straw or dry grass. Hang on a tree branch closest to where baby was found, 2 - 3 metres off the ground, well away from the trunk, (protection from predators) and with overhead branches for protection from the sun. Keep all activity such as children and pets away, or the parents will be too nervous to return to feed the baby. If the grass needs mowing - leave it a couple of days. Observe from a distance for no more than 2 hours. Please note: birds build nests that comfortably accommodate 3-5 eggs. Unfortunately, these nests may not be large enough to hold 3-5 growing baby birds. Returning a baby to an overcrowded nest may not be the solution. Creating a substitute nest and placing all the babies in it may alleviate the problem. Remember, parent birds are unable to care for 2 nests at the same time, so it is important to avoid placing a baby in a substitute nest if the original nest still has siblings in it. Once you've left, the parents should reappear and begin feeding baby.

## **3. Naked babies: - (Unhurt): (HATCHLING - See photo below)**

Hatchlings (0 - 14 days), have mostly exposed skin, and either no feathers, or a light downy coat, particularly on their heads, and may have small developing pin feathers on their wings and tail. They are unable to perch if altricial.

The main reasons hatchlings fall from the nest are: Damage by wind, or storm. (It is not uncommon for whole nests to be blown to the ground), removal by competitor birds such as Indian Mynas & Cuckoos, and predators. Renesting these babies is extremely difficult. They cannot survive very long without warmth and food from their parents.



Baby New Holland Honeyeaters

## Renesting?

Before attempting to re-nest an orphan, ask yourself the following questions to ensure that you are not attempting to re-nest an unhealthy or injured baby.

- Is it injured, cold, or dehydrated?
- Is the weather stormy, cold, raining?
- Does its abdomen appear overly wrinkled or paperish-white? Does its abdomen and eyes appear sunken in?
- Is it lethargic, inactive, or uninterested in its surroundings?
- Was it handled by a dog or cat? Did you find it near a dog or cat?
- Are there dead siblings or parents near-by?
- Are there flies around the baby?
- Is it in imminent danger?
- Have you spoken with a rehabilitator, and attempted to re-nest/reunite but have not seen the parents in over an hour?

If you answered YES to ANY of these questions, take the following steps:

- Place the baby in a softly lined covered box with ventilation.
- Place the box in a warm, dark, quiet indoor location away from all humans and pets.
- DO NOT attempt to give it food or water, no matter how much it begs! If transport will be delayed, ask a carer for advice.
- Contact your nearest wildlife care group immediately. You can get their number by calling your local animal welfare groups, National Parks, Yellow Pages, etc. You can also check online.
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If you answered NO to ALL of these questions, or if you are unsure, contact us for instructions on attempting to re-nest or reunite the baby with its parents (please note that if you have attempted a re-nest and the parents have still not returned within one hour, it is an orphan and needs to be taken to a rehabilitator immediately!)

## 4. An Injured Baby:

An injured bird will need more active help. If it's been attacked by a cat, it should always receive professional care, even if it appears unharmed. Gently pick it up in a towel, and put both bird and towel into a well-ventilated box. Keep the patient warm and quiet while you contact a wildlife rehabilitation group. Never try to feed a wounded bird. Above all, don't try to treat it yourself. Wildlife carers are trained and equipped to give the bird its best chance of recovery.

## Can I look after the bird myself?

No. Apart from being illegal in most states, baby birds require specialist care. Providing artificial heating is just one aspect. Add to this that a nestling could require feeding every 90 minutes, and baby birds are notoriously hard to identify (even by experts). The youngster you find could be a nectivore, carnivore, insectivore, granivore, frugivore etc. All these groups require different specialist foods, and supplements, (and the right amount). Obviously if you don't know what bird it is, you can't give it the right food. Even worse, it may require crop feeding. As an example, we see baby Magpies come in crippled because well meaning people have tried raising them at home. They come in crippled because one vital ingredient has been left out of their diet. Most of these Magpies will never walk, are un-releasable, and have to be euthanased. So many people find a chick, put it in a box, and feed it bread and milk... if the baby survives 12 hours on that, it is a miracle... It will not survive the next 12.

Our bird carers, like carers in other groups are experienced, fully trained, and attend regular courses and workshops. We have access to the right food, veterinary care, equipment, and expertise. Please - If you find a genuinely orphaned baby bird, follow the directions above, please contact immediately. You can then rest in the knowledge that your actions have given the baby the best chance at a second chance in life.

## We Thank You