



## Fledgling Songbirds

### Flying is a learned skill!

Young birds go through a learning phase when they are too big to stay in a nest, but they also don't quite know how to fly yet. These uncoordinated teenage birds are called *fledglings*. Fledglings look similar to adults, having most of their feathers grown in, but they often have shorter tails and a few tufts of down remaining on their heads. Healthy fledglings should be active, bright, and hopping around and vocalizing.

### There's nothing better than the care of a parent!

In most species of birds, both parents help with feeding the young both in the nest and on the ground. Teamwork is important because raising young birds is a lot of work! The parents come back to fledgling bird(s) every half hour to hour with more food to satiate their hungry appetites.

### Healthy fledglings should be left alone!

Unhealthy fledglings with wounds, large numbers of mites, fly eggs (which look like tiny, white grains of rice), or live maggots, or birds that are cold, limp or unresponsive need to be seen by a wildlife rehabilitator. If your pet has injured one or more birds, those birds need to be seen by a wildlife rehabilitator, but uninjured fledglings should be left in the care of their parents. If you're having trouble determining the age of the bird, or if you are unsure if a fledgling is healthy, contact Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center at 608-287-3235, or call your local wildlife rehabilitator. Snapping a quick photo of them with your cell phone is a helpful way for us to help us assess the fledgling's condition.

### The babies grow up so fast!

Once they leave the nest, the fledgling birds hop around on the ground for up to a week. This is a natural period of development where they gain wing strength, practice flying, and learn how to forage for food. Within the week, they will know how to fly and be able to perch up in the safety of a tree.



*These are healthy fledgling blue jays.*



*These are nestlings that do not stand or hop, and do not have feathers yet. These birds should still be in a nest.*

### A few important things to know before reuniting.

- **Please do not offer any food or water to the birds** – doing so can have deadly consequences.
- The birds see you as a predator – do not play with or excessively handle them.
- A bird's best chance for survival is with the care of its parents. Reuniting is the right thing to do!

### Reuniting a fledgling is easy:

1. Place the fledgling bird back outside where you found it. If it is in a dangerous place, such as near a road, you can move it a short distance away to a safer location. Placing it underneath a nearby bush or plants will provide it with some safety. Fledgling birds will vocalize to their parents, and the adult birds should have no problem finding a healthy young bird.
2. Leave the area so that the parents can feel safe enough to return to tend to their baby. Be sure children and pets are away from the area during this time.
3. Watch continuously from a distance or from a window inside your home for at least one hour to determine if the parents are coming back to feed the fledgling. Using binoculars can be helpful if you have them available.
4. If you haven't seen any adult birds approach the fledgling after one hour of constant monitoring, call Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center at 608-287-3235, or your local wildlife rehabilitator for further advice.



*These are fledgling gray catbirds. When approached, fledgling birds may open their mouth and vocalize to beg for food, but please resist the urge to feed them anything.*



*This is an American goldfinch fledgling. Note the small tuft of down remaining on the top of his head.*

### **I'm afraid my dog will hurt the fledgling!**

Dogs are curious, and their drive towards predation can lead them to hurt young birds. Since baby birds grow so fast, it only takes a few temporary modifications to allow the bird enough time to grow and fly away safely. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Walk your dog in a different part of your yard away from the fledgling(s).
2. Take your dog on a walk or to the dog park instead of exercising them in your yard.
3. Keep your dogs on a leash or tie-out that is too short to reach of the location of the baby. Note that fledgling birds are always on the move, so it's a good idea to supervise your dog while these birds are on the ground.

This short inconvenience for you and your dog will be a lifesaver for the baby bird!

### **I've touched the bird. Won't mom abandon them?**

No, birds will not abandon their babies because you touched them. While it is advisable to handle them as little as possible, and to wear gloves while doing so, you can rest assured that the parents will return and continue to care for their little ones if they are able.

### **I'm worried about outdoor or feral cats hurting the bird.**

It is true, outdoor cats, whether owned or feral, create big problems for wildlife. We advocate for keeping cats indoors or being contained in an outdoor porch or patio. Young fledgling birds are vulnerable to predation by cats, and other predatory animals, during the short time where they are on the ground and unable to fly. Even with the potential threat of free-roaming cats, it is important to give parent birds the chance to raise their young. It will be the babies' best chance for survival.



*A pair of house finch fledglings.*



*Common grackle fledglings. Note the short tail and remaining tufts of down on the head of some of the birds.*