



## Nestling Songbirds

### Welcome to the world!

Baby birds that can't hop around or control their own body temperature yet are called nestlings. As the name suggests, birds of this age belong in a nest. Often they have bare patches of skin, and fluffy baby feathers called "natal down."

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

Both the mom and dad birds of most avian species bring food to the chicks. Good thing there are two parents because feeding little birds is a lot of work! One parent should be at the nest every twenty to thirty minutes to feed them. In addition, the parents spend time at the nest brooding the babies to keep them warm.

### Healthy nestlings should be returned to their nest!

Unhealthy nestlings with wounds, large numbers of mites, fly eggs (which look like tiny, white grains of rice), or live maggots, or nestlings that are cold, limp or unresponsive should not be returned to their nest. If your pet has injured one or more birds, those birds should be seen by a wildlife rehabilitator. Uninjured nestlings can be returned to the original nest. If you're not sure if the nestlings are 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 to help us assess the bird's condition.

### In order to reunite healthy nestlings, first you must locate the nest!

Birds will often fall straight down, and if you just look up, the nest will be usually be nearby. Talk to your friends and neighbors to see if anyone has a tall ladder that you can use to put the birds back safely in their nest if you can locate it. Make sure to watch for a parent to return for at least an hour after reuniting to ensure that you found the right nest. If there is a nest in the tree, and possibly other baby birds, it is important to get the baby that fell into the nest with its siblings so that the parent can still brood them to keep them all warm. If the entire nest has fallen, and there are multiple uninjured babies on the ground, the babies can all be reunited together in a new artificial nest that you can create.



*Nestling house finch begging for food. This behavior is called gaping. Resist the urge to feed the nestlings.*

### 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!

### Steps to reuniting baby birds (when all babies are out of the nest):

1. Be sure the baby birds feel warm to the touch. If they do not feel warm, they should be warmed before a reuniting effort can take place. To protect the babies from a burn, be sure the heat source is not in direct contact with the babies by using cloth as a buffer between them and the heat source.
  - To warm the babies, use one of the following methods:
    - Fill a sock with uncooked rice. Microwave the sock in 30-second increments until it feels warm, but not scalding hot. It usually takes 2-3 minutes depending on the power of your microwave.
    - Fill a plastic soda or water bottle with hot water. Wrap the bottle in a soft cloth or put in a sock. Place it next to the babies.
    - Use HotHands or other brand of instant hand warmers under a layer of cloth.
2. While the babies are warming, proceed with the preparation of the nest as described below (if required), or return the nestling to the original nest as soon as it is warm.
3. Find a plastic container for the foundation of the nest. Margarine tubs, cool whip containers or disposable food storage containers work well. Chose a container that is slightly bigger than the nest they were in, or that will easily fit the birds without an excess amount of room.
4. Poke or drill numerous small holes in the bottom so that water is able to drain through if it rains.
5. If you have the original nest, place that in the container you have prepared. If not, recreate a bowl-shaped nest in the container with dry, natural nesting materials such as dried grass. Do not use any man-made materials, hair or absorbent materials in the nest. Be sure there is a depression in the middle of your homemade nest for the birds to rest in.
6. Attach the new nest as close to the original nest location as possible. If you are unable to reach or do not know the original nest location, hang the nest as high in the tree as you can safely get to. Be sure the nest has some overhead cover of branches or leaves. Secure the nest to the tree with twine, rope, a nail, bungee cord or any other materials available to you. Be sure it is secured and will not twist when a parent bird lands on the edge to feed the babies.



*An example of a homemade nest. Make sure there are holes in the bottom so it drains in case of rain.*



*Use natural materials to fill the nest. Don't use fabric, paper products, string or hair.*



*Make sure the nest is attached securely, and won't fall when parents land on the edge.*

7. Once the nest is secured, place the babies back into the nest. The babies should be placed close together, and should be snug in the nest next to each other, with their wings and legs tucked in. If there is excess space in the nest, use additional natural materials to snug up the edges around the birds. This is important to be sure their legs and wings develop normally.
8. Once the birds are settled in their nest, leave the area so that the parents can feel safe enough to return to tend to their babies. Be sure children and pets are away from the area during this time.
9. Watch continuously from a distance or from a window inside your home for one hour to determine if the parents are coming back to feed the nestlings. Using binoculars can be helpful if you have them available.
10. If you haven't seen any adult birds approach the nest 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.



*Nestling robins in their original nest. Note how the babies are snug right next to each other in the nest with wings tucked in and legs under them.*

#### **What if the bird is an invasive species or nest parasite?**

Some Wisconsin birds, such as brown-headed cowbirds or cuckoos, thrive by laying their own eggs in a nest of a completely different bird species. These species are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and may not legally be removed from a nest. This is an adaptation for survival called "nest parasitism." Occasionally, a nestling bird that has fallen from the nest is actually a nest parasite, and the nesting parent is actively trying to kick it out. Reuniting attempts may not be successful.

Other times, you may encounter an aggressive invasive bird species, such as English house sparrows or European starlings, which will attack or kill other birds in a nest. These babies may need to be seen by a wildlife rehabilitator if you find them injured and on the ground.

#### **The nest was built in an inconvenient location. Can I move the nest?**

All native songbirds, their nests, eggs and feathers are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Once a nest has eggs or baby birds in it, the nest may not be tampered with at all. The good news is baby birds are not in the nest long, and will be out and on their way before you know it!



*English house sparrow shown antagonizing a nesting tree swallow.*

<http://www.treeswallowprojects.com/spardam.html>