



Fledgling Raptors

Flying is a learned skill!

All young birds, including raptors, 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 often called *fledglings*. When the bird is a raptor you will also hear the term "brancher" for a young bird who is spending their time standing on branches rather than in the nest. Fledglings have shorter tail and wing feathers than adults, and overall have more downy feathers with most of their head feathers remaining fluffy in appearance. Healthy fledglings should be bright, and actively observing their surroundings.

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

In most species of raptors, both parents help with feeding the young both in the nest and on the ground. Typically one parent will hunt for food, while the other stays nearby (often out of sight) to ensure the babies don't find themselves in any trouble. Teamwork is important because raising young birds is a lot of work! Due to the difficulty of catching prey there may be no visible parental presence for several hours.

Healthy fledglings should be left alone!

Unhealthy fledglings with wounds, large numbers of mites, fly eggs (which look like small, 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 and healthy fledglings should be left in the care of their parents. If you are 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.



This is a fledgling great horned owl showing a classic defensive pose. He's trying to look larger to convince you to leave him alone.



This is a hatchling great horned owl and is too young to be out of the nest. Hatchlings are covered in downy feathers.

The babies grow up so fast!

Once they leave the nest, fledgling birds stand on low limbs of trees or directly on the ground for a week to ten days. This is a natural period of development where they gain wing strength, and start learning how to fly. After a week, they will know how to fly and will likely perch higher in trees further away from the dangers of the ground.

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 in 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 few feet away to a safer location. Placing it onto a nearby bush or in the low branches of a tree 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.
 - For your safety, we suggest wearing heavy leather gloves, safety glasses, and a heavy long-sleeved shirt or jacket if you need to handle a bird.
 - When picking up a fledgling raptor, hold around the sides of the body while keeping the wings tucked in and the feet pointing away from you and others.
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. If any loud yardwork is being done nearby, this may also prevent the parents from visiting their young until the disturbance has ended in the evening.
3. Watch the bird from a distance, and look for signs the parents are coming back to feed the fledgling. Using binoculars can be helpful if you have them available.
 - Remember that an owl's parents rest during the day, and will most likely return in the evening.



This is a fledgling barred owl. You can still see the fuzzy baby down on his head.

4. If the bird is in the same place after 24 hours or begins to look lethargic and tired, call Dane County Humane Society's Wildlife Center at 608-287-3235, or your local wildlife rehabilitator for further advice.

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 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 have 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 that 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 red-tailed hawk fledglings.