

# The Outside Story

## How to Rescue a Baby Bird – And When to Leave it Alone

By Anna Morris

This is the time of year when my yard feels bursting with life, as the neighborhood welcomes eastern phoebes, ruby-throated hummingbirds, and broad-winged hawks back from their long migrations. At the Center for Wild Bird Rehabilitation at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science, where I work, “baby bird season” is also underway.



The dedicated rehabilitation staff will spend the next few months, from dawn until dusk, caring for hundreds of injured and orphaned birds, getting them healthy and strong enough to be released back into the wild. However, rehabilitators don't have the resources to leave their current patients and go out to rescue every injured bird. They rely on the rest of us to be “first responders,” able to observe a potentially injured creature and bring it in for treatment if necessary. Because it can be hard to tell the difference between a bird that is truly injured and one that is perfectly healthy, we give these creatures the best chance for survival by recognizing when help is needed and knowing exactly how to get it for them.

Nearly all of the hungry, hurt, or weakened birds treated at the Center are brought in by caring members of the public who find them. They may have flown into windows, been hit by cars, or are simply too young to be out of the nest on their own. Wildlife rehabilitators are professionals who specialize in treating sick, injured, and orphaned wild animals so that they can be returned to their natural habitats. Because all native birds – and many mammals, reptiles, and amphibians – are protected by law, wildlife rehabilitators are required to hold permits allowing them to care for these creatures.

The most common interaction people have with wildlife is when a baby appears to be separated from its parents. A young bird out of the nest may indeed be in trouble – or it may be on the cusp of independence. Rather than guess at what might be going on, your first step should be to call for advice. If you live in the Upper Valley, VINS' Center for Wild Bird Rehabilitation is your closest rehabilitator. If you live elsewhere in Vermont or New Hampshire, calling VINS is still a good idea, as they can provide contact information for a rehabilitator closer to you. If you are outside of these places, your state's Fish

and Wildlife agency should have a list of all licensed rehabilitators in your area. (Most rehabilitators are only licensed to care for certain species, another important reason to call before transporting an animal!)

Wildlife rehabilitators are very busy people, so you may need to leave a message. Give as much relevant information as you can, including what kind of animal you have found and where you are located. If you've found a baby bird, do you see the nest or adults of the species? Is there an injury? If the bird is bleeding, is covered in flies or other insects, or was observed being caught by a cat or dog, the bird likely needs medical care. It is up to the rehabilitator to listen to these details and advise you with the next steps.

If you can't bring the bird to the rehabilitator right away, and are, for example, advised to keep it overnight, you'll want to put together a rescue kit. Get a cardboard box with a lid and a soft towel folded in the bottom, and place the bird inside the box, which should be kept in a warm, dark area. Rehabilitators will likely direct you not to give the bird any food or water. This is to prevent further stress, as the bird may get chilled from a spill or could be too weak to handle solid food.

Finally, keep yourself safe, and wash your hands. Although there are few diseases birds can transmit to humans, it is always smart to protect yourself and others in your household.

There are many, many ways that wild animals get injured, and wildlife rehabilitators have years of experience and many resources that allow them to give the best possible care to wild animals. We, too, can make our human environments safer for wild birds in a variety of ways. Making large windows bird-safe, keeping cats indoors, picking up litter, and avoiding pesticide use are excellent ways to help birds right in your backyard – and reduce the number of birds in need of rescue.

*Anna Morris is an environmental educator at the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. Illustration by Adelaide Murphy Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: [www.nhcf.org](http://www.nhcf.org).*

**Northern  
Woodlands**

PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768  
[mail@northernwoodlands.org](mailto:mail@northernwoodlands.org) / 603-795-0660  
[www.northernwoodlands.org](http://www.northernwoodlands.org)

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