



Baby birds

The best chance of survival for a baby bird is if it is left alone to be reared by its parents. The parents know how often to feed it and what food it needs at certain points of its development. They will alert it to danger that humans may not notice and will shelter it from bad weather and cold. Once picked up by a person, the chance of survival are immediately reduced.

In spring and summer much of Yorkshire's wildlife is busy breeding and there are many young and inexperienced birds and animals in the countryside.

Many young birds fledge (leave) the nest before they are able to fend for themselves or properly fly. At this stage some species are completely reliant on their parents for food, and will remain so until they can fend for themselves. This is completely normal and occurs among many common species including garden birds, such as blackbirds and song thrushes.

Some baby birds can feed themselves as soon as they hatch, a strategy commonly found in birds that nest on the ground such as ducks and waders. Nest sites on the ground are vulnerable to predators such as cats, badgers

and stoats, so it is better for the chicks to leave the nest site as soon as possible. The young birds tend to be brooded by the parents at night and in bad weather away from the nest site.

The number of baby birds that die soon after leaving the nest is incredibly high, but birds have evolved to cope with these losses by having larger broods. Then, only a small number need to survive to maintain the population.

What to do if you find a baby bird

The best advice is to leave baby birds where you find them and not pick them up, unless in immediate danger from road traffic, a local cat or something else. If the bird is under serious threat, move it so somewhere close by that is out of 'harm's way'. It is then best to leave the bird well alone, to give the parents chance to find it. Young birds call loudly and often and it won't take long before the parents relocate it.

What if the bird is really young?

Birds that are fed in the nest for a few weeks or more, such as blackbirds, are often naked, blind and helpless on hatching. If they are found out of the nest, they are very unlikely to survive. Parent birds can detect if a chick is not thriving or is ill and they will often cast these individuals out of the nest on purpose, presumably because they would die anyway. Also, finding such chicks out of the nest can be a sign that a nest has been interfered with, by a cat, a magpie or other predator. In this case, nothing can be done very easily and the parents will usually abandon what is left of their nest and brood.

Swallows and house martins

Swallows and house martins remain in their lofty nests until ready to fly, even though they will still be fed by



Swallow nest - Credit Carl Watts



the parents for a few weeks. To get ready, they spend lots of time strengthening their wings and this can sometimes lead to them falling from nests. If it is safe to do so, putting these 'nest jumpers' back in their nest can be quite successful.

Owls

The most commonly encountered owl chick is the tawny owl and they are well known for leaving the nest before they can fly or feed themselves. The high pitched squeak of young tawny owls can be heard incessantly in woodland on summer nights, as dispersed chicks call hungrily to let their parents know where they are, and that they are hungry! Sometimes these youngsters can fall to the ground, but they are well equipped to clamber up tree trunks back into the canopy. So, unless the owl chick is in immediate danger, or is away from a likely climbing tree it is best to leave it alone. If danger is present, then placing the owl back up the nearest tree is a good plan, but only if this is safe to do so.

Mallards

Mallards nest on the ground and quite often away from

water. Once the ducklings hatch, the mother bird leads them down to water where they are capable of feeding themselves.

Sometimes mallards nest in peculiar places or sites remote from the nearest water and thus the route to water can be very hazardous for the young family, especially if it involves road crossings or busy urban areas. In these instances, shepherding the family down to the water can alert traffic and passers by to the family to avoid accidents. In extreme cases, catching the ducklings in a box, plus the mother if possible and taking them all down to the nearest piece of water can give them a good start in life. Likewise, if it is not too far, putting the ducklings in a box and then walking swiftly down to the water with the mother following along behind or overhead can work well. Catching the ducks should be the last resort and only attempted if leaving them alone would end in disaster.

Professional care

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust does not have the facilities or skills necessary to hand rear abandoned baby birds. Also, during spring and summer vets and animal hospitals are inundated with calls about them and it is difficult for them to respond to all requests for help, especially as the chance of survival for most small bird chicks is so low, once away from their parents. Therefore, it is best just to remove the chick from any immediate danger if relevant and then retreat to a safe distance and hopefully after a while, the parents will re-join the chick and continue to look after it.

Find out more

If you would like to find out more about Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and how to become a member then please contact us using the details below.

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Tawny chick - Credit Carl Watts