



# Great Basin Wildlife Rescue

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## What To Do If You Find A Baby Bird

During the spring months, Great Basin Wildlife Rescue receives hundreds of calls about baby birds. The following is a quick guide to help you decide what to do if you find a baby bird. First, you must determine whether the bird is a nestling or a fledgling. Fledgling birds tend to have a lot of their feathers and a short tail. They are able to walk, hop, flap and attempt to fly. Nestlings on the other hand have very few feathers and aren't able to travel very well on their own.



Photo: Cooper's hawks, GBWR

In most cases, if you encounter a nestling you can put the bird back in its nest. Most birds do not have a strong sense of smell and will usually continue to take care of their young. However, it may take a parent bird several hours to return to a disturbed nest, so avoid going near the nest after returning the baby bird. If the nest is destroyed, you can create an artificial nest out of a small box or strawberry basket, line it with tissue, and place it near where the original nest was.

On the other hand, many fledgling birds spend several days on the ground before learning to fly. They use this time to learn to find food, identify predators, and learn to fly. While it may appear that fledgling birds are abandoned, the parents still care for these birds so it's best to keep people and animals away from the area.

It is not a good idea to raise a baby bird on your own. While it may seem safer to keep the baby bird at your house than to leave it outside, the baby bird will actually have a lower chance of survival when released. A baby bird learns a lot of things from their parents that are vital for survival that you won't be able to teach it. In addition, birds have complex diets and it will be difficult for you to feed the bird the proper foods. In the case of birds of prey, it is illegal for you to raise one on your own and it can actually be dangerous for you since raptors have sharp beaks and talons. If done incorrectly, many birds also imprint on their caretaker which will further affect their

ability to survive in the wild.

If you find an injured or legitimately orphaned baby raptor this spring, please contact the Division of Wildlife or Great Basin Wildlife Rescue.

## Questions for Connery

### How do baby birds learn to fly?

Surprisingly, it only takes about two weeks for a baby songbird to learn to fly from the time it hatches. Bigger birds, such as birds of prey, take longer because they have more growing to do before they're strong enough to fly (for example, the nesting period for bald eagle chicks is 56 to 98 days). But once a baby bird has transitioned from nestling (doesn't have feathers and is too young to hop around) to a fledgling (is starting to grow feathers and can move around), it's ready to learn to fly. Although most birds are naturally built to fly, it still takes some practice for a baby bird to get it right.



Photo: Connery the Northern Saw-whet Owl, GBWR

A lot of songbirds learn to fly from the ground. As baby birds get older, their parents begin standing a short distance away from the nest at feeding time so the fledglings have to move out of the nest to eat. In the process they often fall or are pushed out of the nest. They then spend the next week or so on the ground or in low shrubs, hopping around and flapping their wings and gradually moving from taking short flights to taking longer and longer flights. During this time, even though the baby songbirds aren't living in the nest anymore, they are still fed by their parents, who recognize them by the sounds they make. After a young bird learns the basic mechanics of flying and begins flying higher and for longer distances, it learns things like using the wind for lift and how to make difficult landings.



A fledgling mistle thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*, a European species related to the American robin. Jim Champion, [geograph.org.uk](http://geograph.org.uk), [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mistle\\_Thrush\\_fledgling\\_Bratley,\\_New\\_Forest\\_-\\_geograph.org.uk\\_-\\_469622.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mistle_Thrush_fledgling_Bratley,_New_Forest_-_geograph.org.uk_-_469622.jpg)

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## Cracked: The Hatching Process

How long an egg needs to incubate depends on the bird. Eggs of small birds, like songbirds, take about two weeks. The bigger the bird, the longer the eggs need to incubate. For example, raven eggs take about three weeks, peregrine falcon eggs take about four weeks, and golden eagle eggs take about six weeks.



Hatching blackbirds, Italy, Lucatani at Italian Wikipedia [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hatching\\_birds\\_in\\_nest\\_with\\_eggs.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hatching_birds_in_nest_with_eggs.jpg)

Once a baby bird inside an egg has almost completely developed and takes up most of the egg, it positions its head at the large end of the egg and breaks through the membrane that has been surrounding it inside the egg; it does this because there's an air pocket there, and the baby bird can begin breathing the air inside the egg, which ensures that the chick's lungs are strong enough to breathe once it hatches. As it gets closer to hatching, the baby bird eats the fluids inside the egg, which give it strength. The longer the baby bird is inside the egg, the weaker the eggshell gets,



since the minerals are needed to strengthen the bird's bones. It also makes it easier for the chick to break through.

When the bird is ready to hatch, it rubs its egg tooth (a sharp part on their beak) against the shell until it pokes a small hole. Then it rotates inside the egg and cuts a ring around the center. Finally, it pushes its head against the big end of the egg and its feet against the small end until the egg cracks in half. It's an exhausting process for the baby bird, but even right after hatching it still has the strength to lift its head and open its mouth so that its parents know it's hungry.

## Education Programs

Great Basin Wildlife Rescue provides excellent education programs to the public. We travel throughout Utah County with our education birds and provide presentations to schools, fairs, expos, Eagle Scout courts of honor, and many more!

If you are interested in having us attend your school or event, please contact us for pricing and scheduling information.



*If you encounter sick, injured, or orphaned wildlife, please contact Great Basin Wildlife Rescue, the local Division of Wildlife Resources, or your local Fish & Game Agency.*

Photo: Barn Owl, GBWR