

Injured Bird Care



Badger Run Wildlife Rehab

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A 501(C)3 not-for-profit corporation



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HELP! I'VE FOUND AN INJURED BIRD IN MY YARD, WHAT DO I DO?

Finding a bird on the ground that doesn't immediately decide to fly away when approached is a pretty good sign that something is amiss. Birds have a strong sense of self preservation; so strong that they will refuse to show any signs of injury until their condition is critical. The good news is that not all grounded birds are injured and you can help save many of those who are.

You will often need to capture the bird before you will be able to evaluate what course of action needs to be taken. The first thing that should always be in your mind is safety - Safety for yourself and safety for the bird.

For your safety, take a minute to consider how the bird may defend itself. Remember, you know you are there to help, but from the bird's point of view, you are a predator, hoping for a tasty lunch! Common methods of defense from a bird are: using its beak to bite or strike, attacking or grabbing with claws or talons, and using the wings to buffet and scare you (the predator) away. The bird's body style will help you determine what you need to be wary of.

For the bird, you need to be aware of possible injuries that are currently in play and how you need to handle the bird to keep from causing more. The first is discovered by observing the bird for a few minutes. Watch for subtle and not so subtle signs such as dragging a wing, drooping shoulder, not putting weight on a leg, bleeding, head tilt, and the birds ability to focus. Abnormalities in these areas will help tell you about the bird's current condition.

Please read the following guidelines to help you determine the best cause of action and how best to handle any bird.

Beaks



Long spear like beaks belong to birds that are practiced at striking small objects VERY rapidly with great force and precision. Think of those beaks as deadly spears. This type of beak is usually found on water birds such as herons, egrets, cormorants and pelicans. Never look at one of these from the tip down and be sure that the neck is well controlled when handling these birds. Though they will often strike at whatever is closest, they usually aim for your eyes if they feel that they are in danger. And, do not underestimate their range! Those long powerful, flexible necks are extremely agile; a Great Blue Heron can strike with accuracy within about three feet!



Hooked beaks are designed for tearing and can rip skin very quickly. Their edges are razor sharp and they have a tremendous amount of power for tearing the flesh of their prey.



Short round pointy beaks are usually designed for cracking seeds and these birds know how to pinch and rotate for maximum effect. Somehow they always know just where the sensitive spot is to grab, such as the tender web of flesh between your fingers.

To keep both you and the bird safe be sure to know where their head is at all times and be sure it is either covered with a thick towel or blanket or securely in someone's grasp. The grip should be firm enough to keep the bird under control while not choking it.



Feet

The raptors and carrion eating birds have feet that are designed to catch prey or hold something in a strong grasp while they eat. In a rescue of any type of raptor, you **MUST** be ever cautious of the feet. Even a small Kestrel's claws can pierce skin and leave behind infection causing bacteria. The larger hawks, owls and eagles can do serious injury if you allow them to strike at you. Always know where the feet are with these birds, always wear a heavy pair of gloves, (such as welding gloves) and keep a firm grip high up on the legs, close to the body.



Wings

Many birds without “spear-like” beaks or sharp talons use their wings to beat their attackers off. Examples of these birds are doves, ducks, geese and swans. Usually it is only the larger birds that can cause you serious harm with their wings, but even a Mourning Dove can do damage if they flip a wing in your eye. Also, any bird can injure itself if flaps its wings hard and contacts a nearby solid object.



Capture

The good news is that most birds are caught with a similar method. Cover the head and body with a large towel or blanket and then get control of the possible weapons while the bird is still covered. The size and thickness of the cover must be adjusted to the bird you are trying to capture. One that is thick enough to give protection from a red tail hawk would suffocate a blue jay so use your judgment when choosing a covering for the bird.

If the bird is still in relatively good health, you may find that despite its injuries, it is going to do everything within its power to resist capture! No matter how well done, the simple act of capture and assessment is very stressful for a bird and if prolonged, can worsen its condition. If you can't easily catch the bird on the first or second try, then you should call an experienced wildlife rehabilitator or the local fish and game office to help.



There are five basic categories that a grounded bird will fall into:

Crashed Into Something

Landed In The Wrong Place

Baby Bird

Obviously injured

All Others

Crash Landed

These are birds that have run into something while flying. The most common culprit for this is a window. Birds have a hard time seeing glass and frequently attempt to fly through it as if it is air, much to their chagrin. The first thing normally noticed is a sudden loud crash or thump.

Birds that have run into an object are frequently found either limp or fluttering around just below their impact spot. The good news is often they are simply stunned.



The best way to take care of a bird that has crash landed is to put them on a soft cloth in a box, place it in a dry, dark, warm, quiet place for a couple of hours and then take the box outside, open it up and wait a few minutes to see if your patient will fly away. If it can, then all is well for both you and the unfortunate bird, who probably still has a headache! If it does not fly away, it is time to call your local wildlife rehabilitator for help.

For prevention of this all too common mishap, there are several things you can try:

- “Draw” on your windows with a fluorescent yellow highlighter. It won’t impair your view, but the birds can see the sun reflecting off the highlighter tracks and will avoid the window.
- Hang movable, shiny items in front of the window such as old CDs or Mylar strips or pinwheels. The sun glinting off these objects will scare the birds away from this area.
- Move bird feeders further away from windows to decrease likelihood of contact

Landed In The Wrong Place

Many water birds such as Ruddy Ducks and Loons have heavy bodies and very short wings. They can only take off from bodies of water such as lakes and rivers, where they can get a running start on the water.

Often, during heavy rain or snow/ice storms, these birds become fatigued and seek a body of water to land on to rest.

Unfortunately, in a storm, (especially at night), a wet asphalt parking lot looks much like a lake and these birds land there, expecting to rest a few hours then take off again. Only to find, that they are unable to get the swimming start they need to gain flight.



These birds do not need a wildlife rehabilitator, they simply need to be caught and transported to the nearest lake, canal or river so they can build up the speed they need to fly again.

So if you find a downed duck-like bird in a “land-locked” area, especially after a storm, check for injuries as a precaution, but you will probably simply be able to bring it to the right place and watch it happily return to the wild.

Baby Bird

Ah, Spring is here and baby birds abound! As wonderful a sight to see as that is, it can bring problems.



Baby birds begin to try “test flights” long before they are really ready to fly. In the perfect world, they jump/fly a few inches to the next branch, gradually increasing the distance until they are really capable of flight. In the real world, however, they often misjudge how far they can go, miss their mark and fall to the ground. This is a natural event which occurs in the wild frequently, but becomes a problem when these babies fall into our yards, populated by cats, dogs and kids.

If a baby bird has fallen to the ground, the best thing we can do is to put it back into its nest. If the nest is too high or otherwise unavailable, you can make a “surrogate nest” from a box, bucket, Tupperware, or whatever you have handy. It should be open on top and have sides at least 4 inches high. Line it with a soft cloth and hang it up as high as you can in a nearby tree or under the eaves of

your house or garage, near where the baby was found. The important factors are that it is out of direct weather and high enough that cats, dogs, and kids can't reach.

When the baby calls for food, mom or dad bird will come down and feed it. They don't care that it's in a "strange nest"; they will care for their offspring wherever it is. Don't worry about "your scent", most birds do not have a good sense of smell, and your handling of their baby will not bother them at all.

As tempting as it is to "raise the cute baby", this is not a good idea for many reasons. First, baby birds need to be fed every 15 minutes from sunrise to sunset, and need to be fed a diet that closely matches what their parents would be feeding them. As you can imagine, this can be a daunting task! Also, most parents spend weeks, months, even years teaching their babies how to hunt, what foods are good, and what foods are bad. As "surrogate parents", we are simply not able to duplicate this training.



Obviously, if the baby is injured, it is time to call the Rehabilitator, but otherwise, let Mother Nature do her job and let these youngsters learn their life lessons from their parents, the best teachers they could have!

One final note: In the wild, breeding is all about getting your genetics out there for many future generations. Often times, a mother bird becomes aware that one of her babies has a genetic defect that would compromise its chances for long-term survival. It sounds cruel, but a mother bird expends so much energy raising her young, she simply cannot waste that energy on an offspring that is not likely to survive to adulthood, so she may reject the baby, even throwing it out of the nest. We, well-meaning humans come along, do our best to save the baby, but despite our best efforts, mom does not return and the baby dies. It is important to remember that this is not a result of anything you did or did not do, it is a reality of nature.

Obvious Injuries

Bite Wounds

Bite wounds are serious to birds on many levels. A predator's bite is designed to pierce vital organs and cause immediate death. In some cases this happens, and the bird succumbs quickly, such as when a spinal cord is severed. In other cases, the damage is not severe enough to cause immediate death, and the damage can take days to affect the bird. This is suffering that they should not have to endure.

The second way bite wounds are serious is in the crushing of tissues. Occasionally, the bite will not hit any vital organs, but the bruising of muscles will be enough that the bird cannot fly for several days and a grounded bird is usually an easy target for more attacks.

The third way that bite wounds are serious is the fact that the teeth leave behind bacteria inside the puncture wounds. The wounds seal up quickly and leave the bacteria inside the bird where they flourish and produce either an abscess or general sepsis, both of which can be deadly to the bitten bird.

In ALL cases, bite wounds should be referred to an experienced Wildlife Rehabilitator who can either get the antibiotics and other medical help needed to save the bird, or can offer humane euthanasia if the damage is too extensive and would result in undue suffering.

Broken Wings & Legs

Broken limbs are common injuries to birds, as their lightweight bones that are so well designed for flight, do not stand up well to trauma. Most often, we see



breaks due to collisions with vehicles, or in youngsters just learning to fly, who misjudge distances or turning ability. If you have a bird with a break, an experienced Wildlife Rehabilitator will be able to splint and wrap the injury or get it to a Veterinarian to pin the break. Birds heal amazingly fast and as long as the break isn't exposed to the open air or directly in a joint, their chances for recovery and release are excellent.

All Others

There are many other ways that birds can become injured, and they may not be so obvious.

Electrocutions can cause a slow necrosis or “dying off” of burned tissue and often don't show the full extent of the damage for several days.

Poisonings often present simply as a weak bird that just doesn't act right, sometimes with strange colored mutes (feces).



In Summary

If you come across a bird that has been injured, your first concern should be for your safety – can you safely get to it and restrain and capture it?

Secondly, assess its condition, using the guidelines above, and then act accordingly.

Remember, no matter how good your intentions, an injured bird sees you as “the enemy” and any interaction will be very stressful for that bird. It is critical that you do your best to keep stress at a minimum by following these guidelines:

- Do not “chase” the bird to catch it. If you cannot safely capture it in one or two attempts, call an experienced Wildlife Rehabilitator or your local Fish and Wildlife office.
- If you can capture the bird, place it in a dry, dark, quiet place.
- Do not try to “comfort” the bird by talking or petting. While this may soothe a domestic animal such as a dog or cat, it is adding stress to a wild animal.
- Be aware of “foreign sounds and smells”, such as perfume, smoking, the radio, etc. All these things will further stress the bird.

Finally, given the guidelines above, if the bird cannot be immediately released, contact a licensed, experienced Wildlife Rehabilitator, Fish and Wildlife Officer or Veterinarian, so they may give the bird it’s best chance for recovery and release back into the wild, where it belongs.

