



DO YOU KNOW.....ABOUT FLEDGLINGS

By Alicia Eastham, Staff

Sociologists say that humans have the irrepressible urge to categorize. We see this phenomenon clearly in the way we view the animals that share our world. Fish in the water, birds in the trees, and raccoons in the garbage bin: these categories help us to understand our wild neighbors. Unfortunately, in the case of fledglings our common sense can become misleading. All too often, fledgling birds that are found on the ground are brought in to Second Chance simply because people find it hard to believe they should in fact be out of the nest. The fact is, most species of songbird spend some time out of the nest and on the ground as fledglings. Being brought into captivity during this transitional phase can do a great deal more harm than good.



Fledgling is a term for a young bird that has left the nest but is still dependent on its parents for survival. They have had their eyes open for days if not weeks, they are often able to stand or hop and they spend their time on the ground, usually under some sort of meager cover. As opposed to hatchlings which are “naked”, or nestlings which are covered in fluffy down feathers, fledglings have several smooth primary feathers growing on their wings and back. Fledgling birds leave their nest by jumping out and landing in what is hopefully a soft bed of grass, leaves or dirt. They then spread out, search for cover and call for their parent(s) to come and feed them. The adult parent birds continue to feed these “teenagers” until they are flighted. The purpose for this grounded stage is to reduce predation by scattering and to give the young birds an opportunity to develop their new muscles and bones. By separating from their siblings, the fledgling birds make it more difficult for potential predators to prey on all of them together and increase the chances that a greater number of that batch of babies will make it to adulthood. (9) Earthworms. Although eaten in the wild, they are part of a large variety of items consumed. In addition to not being a balanced diet, some worms carry a parasite which, left untreated, can kill a baby bird.

The care that the parent birds bestow upon their young is far beyond anything that any human caretaker can offer. Although we at Second Chance try our best, using all the accumulated knowledge of the wildlife rehabilitation community, we can never hope to replicate the upbringing that a young bird would receive in the wild. That is why it is as important for all of us to know when to leave an animal alone as it is for us to know when an animal needs our intervention. Luckily, it is pretty easy to tell if a fledgling is healthy just by making a few observations. A healthy fledgling would be sitting or standing up. Its eyes should be open and its head held up, displaying a high level of awareness and activity. As the goal of being “grounded” is to avoid predation a healthy fledgling should be moving from place to place several times a day. No healthy animal should be covered in ants, maggots or other pests. If a fledgling is healthy, it is also important to try and give it some space, as parent birds are often wary of supposed predators and may avoid the baby or try to defend it by diving and screeching at a person or other animal.

If you know that a fledgling is using your yard as a temporary home, please try to avoid the area it is staying in, and keep your dogs and cats away from it as well. Of course, sometimes it's hard to repress that twinge of concern over such a small, delicate and helpless creature making its way across the ground. We must remember however that nature has operated in this manner for quite some time now and none of the songbird populations seem to. House finches have suffered as a result of this hazardous method of childrearing. Though the risk of predation by cats, dogs, crows and other animals are high, an encouraging number of birds do in fact survive to adulthood. The greatest gift we can give these healthy young wild birds is some space and some time to grow. We can only trust that they will eventually grow into their new bodies and venture into the trees.



FLEDGLING SONG SPARROW