



DO YOU KNOW.....?

..... how parent birds feed their babies? Of course, you may say, the parents eat food and then regurgitate it for the babies. This is sometimes the case but, among our common song birds, not always and usually not for long. Many birds that normally eat seed; such as Cardinals, Finches and Sparrows, will switch to insects during the breeding season. Generally, the parent will eat the smaller insects themselves and take the larger ones back to the nest for the babies. This allows them to carry more food less frequently to their ever-hungry offspring. The parent hits the insect against the ground or a branch killing it and "softening" the hard shell. Sometimes, the parent "chews" on the insect further breaking up the chitin (shell) before feeding it whole to a baby. The babies are capable of swallowing much larger items than most people would think possible.

The baby's gaping mouth strongly stimulates the parent to feed it. In fact, if a bird's own brood is destroyed, it may feed other young both of its own species and even other species. A Cardinal was once seen feeding goldfish that were used to begging from people!

Some birds actually produce a substance similar to mammal milk. Pigeons are the best known producers of "crop milk" and both sexes produce it. Crop milk is produced by a sloughing of special cells in the crop and is very nutritious. Pigeon milk contains more protein and fat than either cow or human milk. It is the only food provided to nestlings for the first several days after hatching. Crop milk is fed by both parents for a couple of weeks. As the babies get older, seed is included with the milk. Gradually, more and more seed and less and less milk is provided until the babies are receiving just the seed and liquid that the parents have consumed.

With pigeons and doves, the baby does not gape to be fed. Rather, it squeaks and taps its beak against the parent's beak which stimulates the parent to "open wide." The baby sticks its beak down the parent's throat and, literally, sucks up the contents of the crop.

Most of our song birds do not have a true crop, which is, essentially, a sack capable of

holding a large amount of food. Baby birds without a crop can only hold a small amount of food at a time and must be fed as often as every 20 minutes from sun up to sun down. Pigeons and doves, on the other hand, can hold a large amount of food which slowly passes through the digestive system. Even the youngest baby pigeon or dove can be fed no more than every couple of hours. Of course, for a human being, trying to duplicate this feeding method is a bit difficult unless you know the "tricks of the trade."

If you find a baby bird, please remember that proper feeding technique and adequate nutrition are vital for the bird's survival. Don't try to "do it yourself." We have the time, implements and skills necessary to give young birds their best chance for survival and we are geared up and ready for the spring baby season.

References:
The Birder's Handbook by
Ehrlich, Dobkin and Wheye

NOW YOU KNOW!!!!!!

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