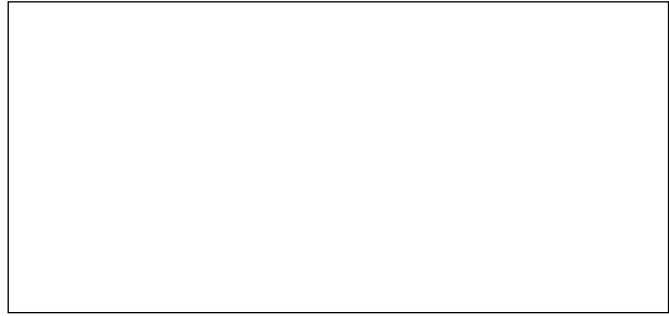


Hand-rearing garden birds

Molly Varga



Finding a baby bird

- Most nestlings that are found on the ground are not abandoned, but have fallen out of the nest before they can fly properly.
- If the chick appears injured, it should be examined by a veterinary surgeon.
- As long as the chick appears to be uninjured, it should be placed in a small container (a plastic or cardboard box with the lid open) and the container placed in a safe position elevated above the ground. A tree branch under cover of leaves is suitable. This allows the parents access to the chick for feeding until it fledges.
- If there is no sign of the parents after several hours of watching from a safe distance, the chick may have been truly abandoned and hand-rearing should be considered.
- There are many wildlife rehabilitation centres in the UK that specialize in hand-rearing chicks and returning them to the wild. A list of various centres may be found at www.bwrc.org.uk.

Housing an orphan

- A chick being hand-reared should be kept warm and out of draughts.
- The chick can be kept in a small plastic cup lined with kitchen towel, which mimics the security and shape of a nest. These are easy to keep clean and small enough to move around so that the temperature can be kept constant.
- As a chick grows and becomes more independent, a small birdcage with low perches can be used.

Feeding an orphan

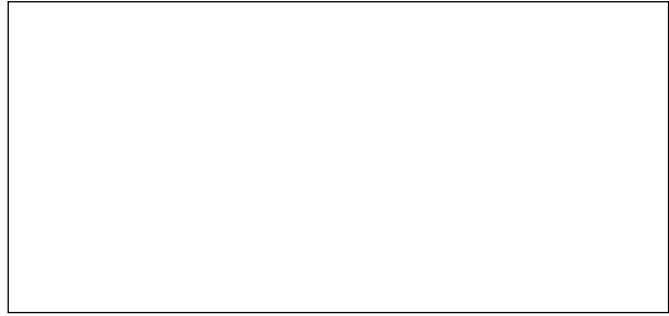
- Most garden birds eat seeds or insects. It is important to identify the species and age of the bird correctly in order to provide the correct diet.
- Commercial diets for insectivorous and seed-based diets are suitable for hand-rearing. Alternatively, Kaytee Exact Hand-rearing food (a parrot diet) can be used for grain eaters, while mealworms (or for short periods until better arrangements can be made, cat food) may be used for insectivorous birds.
- Chicks will often gape in response to movement above their heads, and food can be dropped into their mouths from blunt forceps (tweezers), a small syringe or a small spoon.
- Very young chicks must be fed very regularly (every 15 minutes or so while there is daylight) and will eat up to 20% of their bodyweight daily. Food should be offered in the form of a paste, so that it is less likely to be inhaled and cause choking.
- Feeding should continue until the crop is full. This can be monitored visually as a bulge at the base of the neck that gets bigger as you feed the chick.
- Once the crop is full, feeding should cease until the crop appears empty again.
- As chicks grow and become more mature they should be hand-fed less frequently, but should be given food items in the 'nest' that they can explore and so start to eat independently.
- Weighing the chick each day will show whether it is growing.

continues ►

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continued



Cleaning the 'nest'

- After feeding the chick will pass faeces in a sticky mucus sac, which should be removed.
- Keeping the nest area clean to avoid the build-up of potentially harmful bacteria is very important.
- Some of these, like *E. coli* and *Salmonella*, can affect people too, so you should wash your hands thoroughly after handling the chick and cleaning its nest.

Letting it go

- The time to fledging and independence varies from 14 days (blackbirds) to more than 30 days (crows).
- The method of release can vary with species, and it may be sensible to consider enlisting the help of a local wildlife centre who can release the fledgling with a group of other chicks of the same species.
- Otherwise, once the chick is large enough and well feathered enough to fly, it can be placed in a safe area in a garden (or similar sheltered outdoor space) and allowed to fly away.
- Supplementary food can be provided in a container elevated off the ground for a few days until the chick learns to fend for itself.