

## Magpie Gets her Wings Or How to Raise Wild Birds to Adulthood

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**WRITER'S COMMENT:** *I wrote this article for Cynthia Bates's Journalism class (UWP 104C) during my senior year. The assignment was create a how-to article, and I found myself inspired to write on a subject matter very close to my heart: how to raise and release wild birds. I realized that this was a much more challenging topic to write on than I first imagined. I found it difficult to write on such a topic without using some of the rich experiences I had first-hand. So, instead of writing objectively, as I had originally planned, I decided to share my method of raising baby birds while interweaving the remarkable and heartwarming journey of a yellow-billed magpie. Utilizing both informational and anecdotal perspectives, I illustrated the how-to of caring for fledgling birds, in sequential order alongside Baby the Magpie's development. This article was one of the most rewarding to write, despite its initial challenges. Being able to produce such a moving piece, while still offering the reader something in return, is what makes this a truly memorable and experiential how-to article. Cynthia Bates's UWP 104C class provided me with so much more than the fundamentals of writing and journalism: it provided inspiration—as well as a launching point—towards a career in freelance journalism. At current press time, Baby the magpie has recently been observed with a clutch of fledglings of her very own, a wonderful denouement to this article's narrative and a source of great happiness for the author.*

**INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT:** *For their third feature article assignment, my UWP 104C (Writing in the Professions: Journalism) students write an informative piece about a topic from their own experience or knowledge using facts from a few outside sources to strengthen the informative quality of their discussion. One of the challenges they often face after gathering lots of information is deciding how best to present it—and choosing which details will most effectively support their specific focus for the piece. Keeping her article's purpose firmly in mind, Haley Hauder skillfully combines narration and explanation to educate her readers about bird rescue. Haley's keenly observed details, precise explanation, and strong authentic voice—along with*

*a compelling story—make the piece not only highly informative but also memorable.*

—Cynthia Bates, University Writing Program

The phone call came right around dinnertime. I didn't know who it was, but the question was all too familiar: "Hi, I think I just found a bird that has fallen from a big old oak in my backyard. What do I do with it?" The caller, a friend of a friend, was requesting assistance for a bird that had fallen out of a stand of oak trees into her backyard. Considering her home-based cat rescue program, she urgently requested that I come and pick up the fallen nestling. I paused. It had been less than two weeks since I lost the sparrow I was rehabilitating to a raptor attack during her brief flight practices in the wild. The experience had left me reeling and consumed with guilt. Would it be too soon to take in another bird, especially after I had become so emotionally invested in the last bird? Wild birds face an uncertain life: raptor attacks, other predatory creatures, and man-made objects pose constant risks. But curiosity got the better of me. I wondered what type of bird it was, how old it was, and, most importantly, whether it had been attacked by any of the woman's cats. I agreed to drive over to the woman's house, once again struck by uncertainty, but now driven by a need to save this hapless creature, as it would surely die without somebody's help.

The gravel crunched beneath the tires of my car as I pulled up onto her property. Taking a deep breath, I walked up to her door. She opened it before I had a chance to knock and thanked me profusely as she led me to her kitchen. On the table was an old moving box. I cautiously approached and lifted a flap to peer inside. This was a large baby bird, with an enormous yellow beak and a gangly, partially feathered body covered with some sort of stinky, crusty gunk. I sighed, closed the box, and thanked the woman for calling me. I surely didn't know it at the time, but this would be the beginning of the most memorable rehabilitation experience of my life. I had just brought home a Yellow-Billed Magpie, a unique bird found only in the central valley of California.

To ensure the safety and success of a baby bird that has fallen (or been pushed) from the nest, would-be rescuers must first determine if the bird actually needs help. The Audubon Society regularly receives calls about fledglings found on the ground, and, more often than not, the bird is in a critical phase of development:

Many species of birds such as robins, scrub jays, crows and owls leave the nest and spend as many as 2-5 days on the ground before they can fly. This is a normal and vital part of the young birds' development. While they are on the ground, the birds are cared for and protected by their parents and are taught vital life skills such as finding food, identifying predators, and flying. Taking these birds into captivity denies them the opportunity to learn skills they will need to survive in the wild. (Audubon Society of Portland)

Depending on the species, one option may be to place the bird in a wildlife program, though many of these programs are overcrowded or take only certain avian species, leaving many people without the means to care for these birds. In a fair number of cases, it's legal for people to raise the birds that rescue centers cannot take. Unfortunately, most people are often ill-equipped to release the birds they hand raise into the wild and often end up caging and keeping them as pets. Many who try to raise a baby wild bird fail: problems with temperature, diet, or care often lead to death in fledglings. Unlike baby chickens (or other domestic fowl), wild birds do not thrive under heat lamps, in boxes, or on a heating pad. They require constant bodily heat, and lights or other artificial heat sources often burn the tender skin of young nestlings. Failure to thrive and improper feeding techniques are the most common cause of death. In the wild, they are surrounded by their nest mates and kept warm by the bodily heat of their parents. Unless the rescuer has access to an incubator, the best way to keep a young bird alive is to keep it close to your skin. A bit unconventional, true, but the physical interaction, combined with a no-cage philosophy, produces a curious and well-rounded bird. There are no cages in the wild, and, for a bird to develop its senses, it must be allowed to freely explore its environment.

Once home, I gently washed the crust off the young bird's body and inspected the wings, body, and feathers. No parasites or external injuries were apparent, and, despite the quiet demeanor, the young bird had bright, curious grey eyes. I made up a batch of food to see if the feeding response was active, but the bird was too shocked to show any interest in food, so I let it acclimate for the evening nestled into a towel in my darkened bedroom. This bird was between nestling and fledgling: old enough to generate its own body heat (rendering the papoose method ineffective), but still too young to survive into the next phase of fledging.

The next morning, I awoke to a large and unsightly bird attempting a clumsy half-hop-half-walk gait. I smiled. Clearly, this bird was healthy and curious. I tried again with the food mixture, slightly warmed with hot water, and was pleasantly surprised at the feeding response. I also discovered why she had been encrusted with particles. She was a messy feeder. “Hi, Baby!” I said encouragingly. “Are you hungry!?”

Many wild birds are omnivorous, eating a combination of insects and plant matter. Fledglings are most successful when they receive a diet of proteins. Canned dog food, mixed in even proportion with a wild game starter (found at a local feed store) and lightly combined with water until it is above lukewarm and soupy, is the preferred food for young birds. As they get older, the consistency of the mixture can be less soupy and more solid. As veteran bird rehabber Darlene Hauder states, “It’s important to gradually decrease the water until the mixture is almost cake-like. I usually decrease the water as the bird begins eating on her own.” Baby birds, when very young, eat at least every hour. As they develop more feathers, they will eat larger portions of food with greater spans of time between feedings. “This is largely based on the response from the bird itself,” Darlene explains, “not based on a size or growth chart—each bird is an individual—and it’s really quite important to go with the needs of the bird. They will let you know what they need and if they are hungry.”

As the young bird develops into an adult, it begins flying through the house and practicing outside as well. Baby the Magpie transitioned perfectly from awkward fledgling to capable young adult. After moving outside, she continued eating from the spoon (and eventually from a bowl), practicing her dive-bombing skills, landing skills, and bird calls. She would often tap on the window with the tell-tale magpie call. Affectionately known as “heavy artillery,” her loud “*wee-bee-beep*” could be heard from anywhere on the property. She was adventurous and crafty, stealing and hiding shiny objects, plucking tomatoes, and picking on my dogs. As she grew larger, I began to notice that other magpies would periodically come and visit. I watched with intensity. Mobs of corvids have been known to attack and kill other corvids not in their flock structure, and I was relieved to note that Baby was mostly curious of her visitors, who kept their distance.

One day late in the summer, Baby flew down to the table, squawking and eating ferociously. My mom and I wondered at her strange behavior and then were shocked to see an entire flock of magpies swirling in

the sky above, calling and squawking back. Baby flew up to join them, and the entire flock flew away together. Only then did we realize Baby was ready to fly free. The next few days were hard, so quiet and lonely without the cheery “*wee-bee-beep*.” It was months before we saw another magpie. Then one morning I heard a familiar sound in the trees outside my window. I ran outside in my robe, hoping beyond hope it was the feathered friend I had released into the wild. I knew that call, and, as I peered into the branches, I saw a flash of black and white, and heard another squawk. “Hi, Baby!!!” I cried into the air as she flew away.

Baby makes it a regular habit these days to visit, sometimes bringing a few magpie friends with her. I know her call from the others, and I know it is her way of saying, “I remember you; thank you for raising me to be free!” Raising and rehabilitating wild birds for a successful integration into the wild can be a daunting task. Filled with pecks, poops, messes, late night feedings, dawn awakenings and loads of worry, it’s definitely not a job for everyone. But the end result—being able to release a creature back into its natural habitat—is such a beautiful, poignant experience. Birds have a funny way of pecking their way into your heart. Though I miss her everyday, rescuing and raising Baby to be a wild bird is one of the best things I could ever have done. Hearing that “*wee-bee-beep*,” up in the sky where it belongs, is the sweetest reward.





### **Works Cited**

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