

RAISING BABY SPARROWS & STARLINGS

The following instructions, especially DIET, are only designed for House Sparrows & European Starlings. If used on other species, the birds will not develop properly and will either die on their own or have to be euthanized due to them being unable to fly or survive on their own. If you are NOT sure – email help@wildlifehotline.com with a photo, even from your cell phone, or a friend's cell phone to help with identification. Think of it this way, if you are wrong and this is not a Starling or Sparrow, the bird will DIE and you will have broken a FEDERAL LAW.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Fish & Game Department and the USDA issues permits to rehab centers and rehab professionals that wish to work with native songbirds in North America. These permits do not specifically address rehabbers working with non-native birds like House Sparrows and European Starlings. Both of these birds are extremely common sights in every city and town in North America. Most people do not realize that they are considered 'invasive species' – essentially illegal aliens in the country illegally. Starlings were brought to North America on purpose from England back in the 1800's because a playwright thought it was such a crime that the Americans had never heard the sweet song of the starling that Shakespeare wrote about. He considered the release of Starlings here a 'cultural gift' to the Americas from England. We are still battling this 'gift' as farmers lose crops to Starlings every year, bird feeders get overrun by them especially during baby season, and they can be just messy and troublesome.

House sparrows were most likely brought into North America in cages, as pets. It may have been accidental that they were distributed here, or it may have been deliberate. There was a release of fifty house sparrows in Brooklyn in the 1800's but it is believed that those released birds did not fare well. However they arrived here, they are flourishing. House Sparrows are everywhere, nesting in open mailboxes, wreaths on your front door, and anywhere else that holds still for longer than 20 minutes. Starlings and Sparrows get into the same troubles that any other bird experiences. Babies fall out of the nest, they accidentally fly into a window, fledglings get hurt while trying to learn how to fly, and everything else that can go wrong sometimes will go wrong. Because these birds are non-native though, rehab centers frown upon taking them in and nursing them back to health. Many times finders are told to put it back in the bush, on the ground, or wherever and 'let nature take its course'. We understand how difficult that prospect is for an animal lover like ourselves. Our only mechanism to possibly save and care for these babies is to offer private citizens the information they need to raise them on their own. A rehab permit is NOT required to raise House Sparrows or European Starlings. You are not breaking any laws or regulations doing this. Just follow the directions, take your time, and in the end you will have saved a life – even if it is a non-native life, it's still a life.

TO RESCUE OR NOT TO RESCUE

If you find a baby songbird on the ground, you'll need to know two things to determine whether or not the baby bird needs help. First, you need to know if the bird is injured and second, you'll need to know if it is a fledgling or nestling.

Signs of Injury Include:

- Baby is cold to the touch
- Baby is covered in bugs, ants, or what looks like pieces of rice grains (fly packets)
- Baby is dehydrated – Run your finger up or down the skin on the bird's breast. If the skin wrinkles and stays wrinkled, she is dehydrated. If the skin doesn't react much to your touch, that is a good thing.
- Baby is bleeding or has puncture wounds. Any round, hole shaped wounds on the bird is a sign of something very serious for a bird.
- Baby is gasping or gurgling or making other noises when it tries to breathe. Birds will often scream and make a ton of noise when 'rescued' and that's okay, but sticky sounding breathing, or gasping is not normal.
- Baby is tilted to one side, falling over and not able to right itself. This behavior may be accompanied by seizures as well.

If you see any of the above signs, please give us a call at the Wildlife Hotline immediately @ (636) 492-1610 and we will put you in touch with a local rehabber that can help.

If you feel that the baby bird is not injured, then it will help to determine if baby is a nestling or fledgling. Nestlings are too young to fly, while fledglings are learning to fly. Determining the age of your babies will help you decide how to house them, feed them, etc.

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AGE DETERMINATION:



Photo on Left: Sparrow, About 4-5 Days Old.

Week One: Starts with eyes closed, no feathers, can lift head to gape for food, slight down is emerging, feeding peep is becoming audible. Eyes begin to open by end of week. Feather sheaths begin to pierce skin; feather tracts along back become visible through the skin.

Photo on Right: Sparrow About 7-10 days old, beginning to hold its own temperature (thermoregulate) and is now capable of sitting on edge of nest to poop over the side.

Photo Below: Starling 7-10 Days Old.



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Photos on Left: Sparrow and Starling (respectively) – 11 days old.

Hungry bird location call established, fear and cowering first appears, rapid development of motor coordination, frequent stretching wings and legs, scratching head, yawning, climbing to edge of nest, plenty of actual preening and feather care, able to

track motion to gape in direction of movement, Pin feathers begin to unsheathe. Begins to wing flutter when begging for food, well feathered above and below, preening well established, stretching both wings down at same time, wing beating and hovering, appetite may slacken. Begins to leave nest, tucks head under wing to sleep, unable to fly well, landings are clumsy, pecks at food, may begin eating by itself, playful behavior, drinks at day 13, inactive most of time except at feeding, landing on parent, hopping, walking, landing on others, develops escape reactions to capture, vocalizations now include location note, feeding note, pain cry, fear scream, singing, whispers and warbles, bathing begins day 13-15, beak wiping between day 11-13 as signs of distaste and cleaning of beak.



Photos Above: Sparrow about 18 Days Old (Left) & Starling about 14 Days Old (right) – Fledgling!!! Masters self-feeding, will still actively chase parents for food, learns what to fear and not to fear from parents, actively playing. Begins sunning at day 18, able to sound alarm note, and develops social and anti social behaviors at day 19-21. Fledglings can be as large as the parents (sometimes appearing even larger because they poof out their feathers), and fully feathered. Fledglings are able to hop, but not yet fly.

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FLEDGLINGS MIGHT:

- Look identical to adults but act unable to fly.
- Rock back and forth and seem awkward in its movements, as though it is unsure and unsteady.
- Have most of their feathers, but may also have some fluffy down left over from their recent baby days.
- Perch on your index finger if placed on it. They may not be able to balance for long, but they should be capable of perching for at least a moment or two.

NESTLINGS MIGHT:

- Have no feathers at all, just bare pinkish grey skin.
- Have fluffy down patches instead of feathers.
- Have a flange inside their mouth, on the side. This goes away with age.
- Look like a golf ball with wings that are too tiny for their body.
- Act very friendly and 'gape' (stretch open their mouth for food) at you every time you get anywhere near them and chirp and yell at you if you don't feed them.

Sometimes, it is extremely difficult to tell the difference between fledglings and nestlings. Many of the bullet points listed here can be misleading. Some fledglings will gape and chirp at you endlessly, and some nestlings may not show any of the characteristics that we usually see. Please do not hesitate to call the hotline, or another rehabber to help determine what age baby you have found.

SUPPLY LIST:

- ✓ Heating pad (for nestlings)
- ✓ High Protein DRY Cat Food (Look for as close to 40% Crude Protein as possible on the back of the bag, Brands that have this are usually "kitten" foods by Purina, Science Diet, and Iams, but also Blue Buffalo, Purina Beyond, and other natural cat food manufacturers) Avoid bags that use words like "indoor cat", "hairball remedy", "healthy weight", or any other special 'powers' the foods may have. We just want a lot of protein, calories and fat for our growing babies.
- ✓ Wild Bird Seed – Purchase a couple of different kinds of suet and nuts/berries/seeds mix from a birding store or any department store that has a bird department.
- ✓ Tweezers with a blunt tip, not sharp
- ✓ Paper disposable bowls in a 20+ pack (Dixie makes good ones)
- ✓ Viva© Paper Towels
- ✓ Watercolor Paint Brushes (the kind in the crayon aisle at Wal-Mart that come 20 or so to a pack for usually less than \$3)
- ✓ Coffee Stirrers
- ✓ Mealworms and Crickets (preferably live, but dry will suffice – Wal-Mart sells them in the bird feeder aisle now and PetsMart/Petco sells the live ones for cheap, Also available online at [Duncraft](#))
- ✓ Avian (Bird) Multi-vitamin, preferably Avitron if you can find it ([on Fosters & Smith site here](#)), but if not, any multi-vitamin will do as long as it contains Vitamins A, D3, E, C, B1, B2, B6, B12, K, d-Pantothenic Acid, Niacinamide, and Choline in the ingredient list.

BABY BIRD REHAB RULES

1. **FIRST, DO NO HARM**
2. **PROVIDE CONSISTENT, CLEAN, SAFE SURROUNDINGS**
3. **PROVIDE HEAT SOURCE WHEN NECESSARY**
4. **OBSERVE AND EVALUATE FOR INJURIES, AND IF FOUND, GET BABIES TO A REHABBER**
5. **PROVIDE SUNLIT WINDOW SEAT FOR BABIES DURING THE DAY, EVERY DAY**
6. **PRACTICE PROPER HYGIENE WHEN HANDLING THE BIRDS**
7. **OFFER A VARIETY OF FOOD WHEN BABY IS OLD ENOUGH TO TRY NEW THINGS**
8. **PROVIDE CONSISTENT FEEDINGS AT REGULAR INTERVALS**

RAISING BABY SPARROWS & STARLINGS

HYGIENE

Because of all of the different diseases and parasites that wild birds could be carrying, you must follow some basic hygiene rules to even begin rehabbing them. We are not being overly cautious here. We really do follow ALL of these rules because we have seen what happens when we don't. People can get VERY ill; kids can get sick and then spread it at school, prompting a very uncomfortable call home from the Health Department. You really have to become extra vigilant about cleanliness while raising these little guys. They're cute, but they're full of bugs.

1. Pregnant women, someone who is sick or still recovering, or someone who is immune-compromised (like currently undergoing radiation or chemo for cancer) should NOT EVER handle wild animals or wild birds.
2. When cleaning cage, any and all feces should be disposed of in a plastic grocery bag that you can tie closed or immediately taken to an outdoor trash can. DO NOT use chemicals like 409, glass cleaner, spray bleach, etc. to clean birds' cage. The fumes from these chemicals can and will kill them.
3. Dirty linens should be washed completely separate from household laundry. Use a specific laundry basket for this purpose and don't mix. Wash linens with hot water, regular detergent, and 1 cup of bleach per load.
4. Food dishes need to also be washed separately from your household dishes. If you have an alternate sink from your normal kitchen sink, (like a laundry room sink) use it for bird dishes. Again, use regular detergent plus bleach to disinfect. Clorox spray bleach works great for dishes and surfaces to disinfect – HOWEVER – do not spray Clorox, glass cleaner, air freshener, or anything else anywhere near your babies! A very small amount of these chemicals when inhaled can be fatal for these little babies.
5. Do not allow your pets to hang out in the same room with the birds or play with the birds at all!!! This will get them killed in the wild.
6. Children should be watched at all times when in the same room with wild birds. Parasites are transmittable to humans and kids are usually the ones who get them. Make sure the kids wash their hands often, and be careful to watch and make sure that little fingers don't go in their mouths until after they have washed well.
7. Wash your hands constantly! Keep hand sanitizer right next to the cage, outside of reach of the birds of course. Make everyone use the sanitizer before handling babies and after. Get used to washing your hands BEFORE you use the restroom AND after now that you are rehabbing!

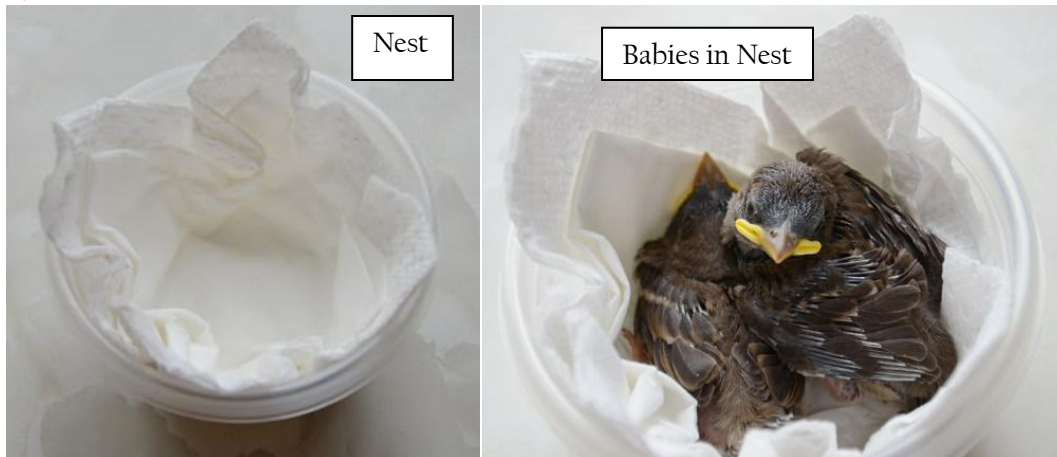
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HOW DO I PREPARE A “NEST” FOR THE BIRD?

For eyes-closed babies:

Find a small cardboard box, disposable plastic or paper bowl, small basket, or even a shoebox is a good size. Line the bottom with a paper towel, or if need be you can put a cloth (not terry cloth) inside on the bottom; a tea towel, or even a t-shirt will do fine. You don't want to use terry cloth (the fabric most towels are made of) because the bird could catch his beak or toes on the loops. Then, make a nest that fits the bird. You can use about a dozen Kleenex tissues or any tissue like toilet paper, wrapped around and around in a doughnut shape, placing the bird inside it. We do this by rolling toilet paper around our own hand then place tissue into our container. By using tissue that is disposable we can change the tissue often to keep babies clean. If the bird is only a few days old or is too sick to move, he will stay in the nest; the nest for very young birds must fit very securely around the bird, with no extra room. The sides should come up to about two-thirds the height of the bird, and not higher than his head. If the nest is the right height, babies will perch on the rim and poop over the side of the nest. Put the bird in the nest very carefully. If you have a heating pad, you may set it on “low,” place a towel over the heating pad, and then set the box with the bird in it on top of the heating pad. A good temperature for a baby songbird is generally 85-90 degrees. Use a meat thermometer occasionally to monitor the temperature inside the nest and adjust accordingly. Put the nest in an area inside the house where the bird will be away from pets and children, an area that is quiet and in the dark, not air-conditioned and not in the sun. You can place this nest inside of a large cardboard box, plastic tote with air holes drilled into the lid, pet carrier crate, or you can place a laundry basket upside down over the nest to protect the birds from accidents with pets or children. These tiny babies CAN get out of a laundry basket through the slits in the sides, so still keep a close eye on babies as they grow. Then leave him alone.

Important: Do not give the bird any food or water unless you are specifically instructed to do so by a rehabilitator. It is very easy to drown a bird.



Eyes Open and Some Feathers:

Create the same nest as described above, but now babies are starting to hop and fly around. If you own a pet carrier, or small bird cage, this is the time to use it. Craig's List can be a life saver for this purpose. If you do not have a cage suitable for the birds, we can make one out of a laundry basket. You will need one laundry basket, a hot glue gun, and a roll of window screening (fiberglass or pet safe). Cover the holes inside the laundry basket with pieces of screening, cut to fit, and hot glue in place. You CAN use tape, but please make sure that none of the sticky sides of the tape are on the inside of the laundry basket. Babies will find those sticky spots and injure themselves. Line the bottom of the laundry basket with newspaper and then a couple of paper towel to make cleaning easier and birds will hop better with the traction from the paper towel rather than the newspaper. Use leftover screening to make a 'lid' for the basket. You can secure the screen lid with clothespins, a bungee cord, or you can even hem the screening and thread elastic into the hem. Make sure to add a couple of branches that you can set up securely inside the basket. Perching branches need to be high enough that bird's tail-feathers do not scrape the floor of the basket.

Active Fledglings:

The more active a baby is, the more room they need for 'fledging' and learning to fly. A large bird cage will work for this purpose, or a child's playpen, a large cardboard box with 'windows' cut into it, a large, clear, plastic tote, or even a dog cage with screening so the birds cannot get out. With a playpen or cardboard box you can create a lid with the same screening that we used for the laundry-basket-cage. Rope or branches can be used inside any of the cages for perches, or both! Make sure that you do not choose a container that doesn't allow the birds to be exposed to sunlight each and every day. Not only does sunlight provide essential vitamins for the bird's development, it also plays an important role in their general happiness and well being.

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HOUSE SPARROW DIET

***DO NOT FEED BABY BIRDS WATER! ***

Nestlings:

Instead of making food for nestlings, you can purchase baby bird formulas from a local pet store. [Petco](#) & [PetsMart](#) sell "Exact Hand Feeding Formula for all Baby Birds". You can order larger quantities of this formula on [Amazon.com](#) to save a bit of money. Commercially available formulas can get expensive, and you should still mix in transitional foods as the bird gets older and closer to weaning.

½ cup mealworms (live, drowned in water with drops of avian vitamin specified in supply list)

½ cup cat food (soaked in warm water so that it is soft and mushy)

2 tablespoons hardboiled egg, mashed up

Save the egg shell (for calcium) and grind up in a food processor/blender/coffee grinder

Add 1tsp ground shell to mix or 1tsp ground Tums tablet for calcium

Mix well; food should be somewhat 'soupy' but thick enough to still able to feed with a set of rounded tweezers.

Fledglings:

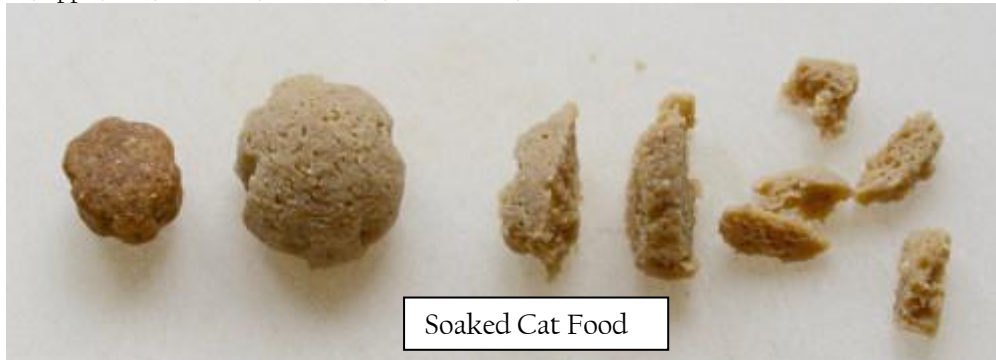
Use the same base mixture as nestlings, but start adding in other transitional foods, at first chopped small, and gradually chopped larger.

For Sparrows:

Crickets, Mealworms, Sesame Seeds, Sunflower Seeds (shell-less, raw, unsalted), Millet, Rolled Oats, Kernel Corn, Wax Worms, Suet Cakes (peanut flavor is a favorite).

For Starlings:

Crickets, Super-Worms, Wax-Worms, Sunflower Seeds (shell-less, raw, unsalted), Rolled Oats, Kernel Cord, Raisins, Carrot, Grapes, Banana, Apple, Pear, Raw Peas, Cauliflower, Ground Beef, Suet Cakes with fruit and berries.



Continue to add a couple of drops of Avian Vitamins to food daily, and continue to add powdered egg shells or crushed Tums for calcium. Much of this can be purchased at Wal-Mart, stores that specifically cater to bird feeders, or online at http://www.duncraft.com/index/page/category/category_id/47. Start hand feeding cat food pieces that have been soaked in some water, but still retains its shape, as well as little pieces of meal worms. This is also the right time to always have a small dish of water in the 'cage' and a small offering of food in the cage too. They might not see it at first, or they might not be interested because they prefer to have you feed them, but it is best to start trying to transition them. When feeding them, place the food inside the 'cage' and feed them from that dish – the one in the cage, in the hopes that they will put two and two together eventually. This is where tweezers are helpful, because you can pick up the seeds from the ground and the babies can watch and imitate. Tap the end of your tweezers in among the seeds you've laid out as though you are pecking with your beak (about one tap a second) and then pick up a seed and feed your bird. You can also buy or find the head of sunflower plants and hang them inside the 'cage'. Birds should begin to pick at the flower and learn that there is food inside.

FEEDING SCHEDULE

Hatchlings and nestlings are fed every 15-20 minutes for at least 12 hours of the day. This means that from 6am – 6pm you will be feeding these guys every 15-20 minutes. Keep a timer on top of the cage, and get used to setting it over and over again. The birds will tell you if they are full. You must maintain this schedule consistently in order for babies to develop properly. Babies will sleep the other 12 hours of the day, from dusk until dawn, so you can live your normal life during the evening hours. Using a pair of tweezers, pick up a small piece of food, no more than half the size of the baby's beak and offer it to your bird. If you are feeding live mealworms, crush the head of the worm with your tweezers before feeding it to the birds. Place the food on the bottom beak, and let the bird swallow. Do not shove food down the throat, into the back of the mouth towards the throat, and do not try to fill baby's mouth. They are not going to CHEW this food. That's not how birds work. They swallow it – whole, and their stomach does the 'chewing'.

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Baby Bird that is NOT hungry



Hungry Baby Bird (Gaping)

When you first try to feed your birds, they might be reluctant to eat from a stranger. There are some tricks that you can try to ease babies into eating. You can mimic the sounds of baby sparrows begging for food, a high, soft “tse tse” for hatchlings and a high “tsepeep” for older babies. You can also bob the tweezers around their head a bit to encourage them to open their mouth (called gaping) for food. Even before babies have their eyes open, they will respond to shadows so try to move your hand around in a way that makes shadows to get their attention. If they will not eat at first, that’s okay – give them some time. If they won’t eat 1-2 hours later, there is a problem. Call a rehabber for help.

As you feed your bird, you may notice a lump or bubble forming in the right side of his neck. This is the bird’s crop. It stores food so it can be slowly passed on to the stomach. The crop is much less noticeable after a bird’s feathers are in place. For now, keep an eye on that crop. If the crop lump is still there at the next feeding (only 15-20 minutes from now) he may be having trouble swallowing. Using your watercolor paint brush, dip the brush into some warm tap water, shake off the excess water, then ‘paint’ the OUTSIDE of baby’s beak. You should not see dripping water off of the baby bird and you don’t really want to give baby a ‘drink’. Think about it – Momma birds do not bring water back to the nest for babies. The most water they ever get is from their diet, or maybe an occasional rain storm. Sometimes a stroke under the chin will help babies swallow just as well.

***Remember* Clean babies faces with a q-tip or cotton ball after feedings. Dried food can clog the nostrils, get in their eyes, and can lead to infections.**



Crop Lump Example

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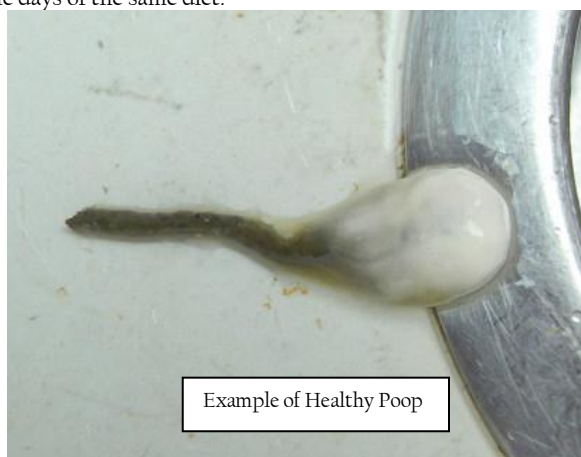
Once the baby's eyes open and feathers are starting to grow, you can stretch out feeding intervals to every 30 minutes, gradually increase time between feedings by 15 minutes every 2-3 days. By the time they can hop, flutter, and spend less time out of their little nest, they should be eating every 60 minutes with food available in the cage all the time. There should also be a small water dish in the cage as well. A small peanut butter jar lid, or comparable lid, even a coaster works well for a water dish. If using a deep lid, place a couple rocks in the water to provide a perch and to prevent drowning.

By four weeks of age, birds should be able to feed themselves. However, no one told them that! They will still gape every time they see you. They will chirp and chirp endlessly, telling you that they are starving to death. You can give in a couple of times per day and offer them a little bite but they need to learn to eat on their own! Babies also need to learn to 'preen' their own feathers and develop their waterproofing. Twice a day babies should be misted with a small spray water bottle. A shallow dish (like a plate) should be available for bathing.



Poop

The consistency of a bird's poop can tell us a lot of about the quality of food that you are feeding them. It's gross to most people, but it's also a really important tool to monitor the health of any animal in your care. Healthy poop should look like a tadpole with a white jelly head and a dark tail. You should be able to pick up a fresh poop with a pair of tweezers without it falling apart. If it falls apart, you may be using too much moisture in your food mixture. It takes a while for a baby of any kind to adjust to new surrounding and a new diet, so expect the poop to show that stress during the first 24-48 hours. Keep checking that it turns to normal poop after a couple days of the same diet.



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RELEASE!

Before release, your sparrow needs to begin to know how to feed itself, and be able to fly to evade predators. This occurs at about 24 days of age, but it's better to assess the baby sparrow's skill than to count days. In the wild, the babies will leave the nest sooner (about 18 days old) than you will be releasing them, but wild sparrows have their parents to watch over them during the final stages of their growth. A sparrow does not need to be completely independent before release. I have observed that adult sparrows will feed young fluttering birds even if they are not the baby's parents. Check the photos in this document to help determine what age/development stage your birds are currently at. We prefer that they be released in an area where there is a supplemental food source (like a bird feeder). Before you release – take a Sharpie permanent marker and mark a small spot on your bird's head that you can see from afar. If possible, try to release the bird close to where you originally found it, which is usually your home. If so, place the bird 'cage' outside on a porch, patio, or somewhere safe. Do NOT leave babies unattended outdoors unless you are absolutely sure that they are safe from predators! Once outdoors, even on a screened in porch, open the top of the 'cage' to give the birds the opportunity to get out. If they do not come out on their own, pick them up and place them on top of the 'cage'. Let them set the pace. They will want to explore a bit, but they may not go very far. Repeat this as many times as necessary. As they get used to it, try going inside to watch from a window or patio door, give them some time alone while you are watching. Place some bird seed on the table or handrails of your porch for them to explore, and hopefully for other birds to come in and eat too. You may be able to call down your bird so you can feed it. Despite how friendly your little baby sparrow seems, in a few days they will have integrated into the local flock and will no longer come to you. They will have achieved independence and freedom at last.

