

Help! I Found A Wild Baby Parrot

What to do if you find a wild baby parrot.

By Angela Pham

Encountering a wild baby parrot is a rare occurrence, but it's a delicate situation that can't be taken lightly, bird experts say.

Wild parrot flocks thrive in California's warm climate. And it's up to local bird rehabilitation and adoption groups to ensure that found wild baby parrots receive immediate, attentive care.

Photo Courtesy: Brenda Varvarigos

A baby parrot some weeks after being brought in to one of the centers. He is healthy and doing quite well.

Southern California boasts flocks of wild Amazon parrots, which are hybrids of Lilac-crowns and Green-cheeked Amazons, and conures, said Bonnie Kenk, founder and executive director of the Parrot Education & Adoption Center (PEAC), based in San Diego. In the San Fernando Valley area, wild parrot species include mitred conures, red-crowned parrots and red-lored Amazons.

But in spite of the existence of these flocks, Kenk said her organization hasn't had to take in a wild baby parrot since 2003.

"They do belong with their flock, so I'm thrilled that we can keep them out there," Kenk said.

If a wild baby parrot is found by someone and it has feathers, Kenk first recommends that the person watch over it for the course of several days to ensure that the parents of the bird are feeding and caring for their baby. If the baby is unfeathered and its parents are nowhere to be seen, or the baby parrot appears injured, she instructs that the bird should be immediately brought in to a group like PEAC for care.

"I haven't had anyone call since [2003] who has found an injured or unfeathered baby parrot," Kenk said. "But when we were taking them in, regardless of their age, the person was always willing to bring the bird to me within an hour's time so I could feed it."

But feeding a wild baby parrot is something that should be left only to the experts, like those at Kenk's PEAC, or Brenda Varvarigos, director of the nonprofit wildlife rehabilitation group, Valley Wildlife Care of the San Fernando Valley (VWC) in California. VWC is one of the rare around-the-clock rehabilitation groups in southern California that takes in wild parrots.

Varvarigos said that if passers-by tried to feed a wild baby parrot, they are likely to do the bird more harm than good. Feeding these unique birds requires a special technique that involves more than simply inserting food into the baby's mouth, she said. Those inexperienced with wild, young parrot species should not risk hurting the bird.

While feeding the baby parrot should be avoided, keeping it warm until it can be taken in by rehabbers is essential. How quickly it should be transported to the bird experts is determined by the baby parrot's age.

Avian veterinarian Attila Molnar, DVM, Dipl. ABVP, whose services are frequently used by Valley Wildlife Care, said if the parrot that is found has feathers, it is likely to be at least 8 weeks old or older. These older baby birds can be kept in a quiet, dark box or small plastic container with warmth from a heating light or heated blanket overnight until it can be transported to an avian veterinarian or bird rehabilitator, though Dr. Molnar warns that a person should be careful not to overheat the bird and burn it. Kenk also recommends that people gently wrap the baby parrot to keep it warm.

But if the baby parrot does not yet have feathers, Molnar said the bird is much more delicate: "The bird must be rushed to an emergency hospital to a vet and be fed [by the avian veterinarian] every three hours," he said.

Finding an injured wild baby parrot is another story. Molnar stresses that while finders of a baby parrot should not try to medicate the bird themselves, even a layperson can help an injured baby from worsening the damage.

He suggests that if a baby parrot has a broken wing or leg, the person can gently push back the limb or wing into a normal

position and stabilize it with a large wrap or bandage. If the parrot has an open fracture and the bone is exposed, he recommends gently stretching the wing or leg, placing the bone under the skin, applying triple antibiotic ointment to the wound to cut infection, and bandaging everything up. The bird should then be transported to an avian veterinarian "as soon as possible," Molnar said.

Because spring and summer, the months when most parrots breed, have passed, wild baby parrots will probably not be found by people until next year, Varvarigos said. Her organization reports that about 75 to 90 percent of wild baby parrots are found in palm trees in the Southern California area, but Varvarigos also notes that each year more wild babies are brought in.

So far, in 2008, VWC has taken in 12 wild baby parrots, she said. In 2007, there were seven; in 2006, there were five; and in 2005, only two had been taken in. Varvarigos said she suspects that habitats are expanding and breeding is more successful, though she said that wild parrots typically have a low survival rate.

After a wild baby parrot is taken in by rehabilitators, like the Parrot Education & Adoption Center or Valley Wildlife Care, and care is provided, two options exist: adoption or release. Choosing which route to take is often dependent on the age of the parrot.

Kenk said that if a baby parrot entered without feathers, it can easily become tame and be placed for adoption as a domestic pet. For older parrots, the transition to being tamed is not as easy, and these birds are typically returned to the wild.

"[Older parrots] have been taught all their wild instincts by their parents and are not happy being in captivity," Kenk said. "If they can be released, they are released back with their flock. If they cannot be released, they are transferred to a sanctuary."

With the increasing influx of wild baby parrots taken in, funding becomes even more essential for these parrot rehabilitators, Varvarigos said. Though she emphasizes that Valley Wildlife Care does not turn any birds away, she said that parrots are not cheap to treat. Veterinarian fees and the cost of feed during the current tough economic times have taken a toll on the group, which relies solely on donations to operate.

"Our group takes in more than 95 percent of all the wild birds from animal control, from six Los Angeles city animal shelters," Varvarigos said. "But if we don't take them in, who else is going to?"