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LIVING

Cats, windows take toll

Birds are particularly vulnerable at this time of year



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Throughout the Kawarthas, spring and early summer is a time when thousands of young birds leave their nests. Many common backyard birds, especially young grackles, starlings, blue jays, robins and cardinals, are found by people who assume the birds need to be rescued. Although we don't want to discourage instinctive humane feelings, particularly when children are involved, trying to "save" the bird is almost never in the animal's best interests. We need to remember, too, that it has always been a fact of nature that fewer than 30 per cent of young birds survive their first year.

The vast majority of young feathered birds we see with short tails have not been orphaned. Granted, they may have been scared by human activity into leaving the nest a few days prematurely. However, it is also quite normal for young song birds to leave the nest before they have fully developed their powers of flight. Although this does make them vulnerable to predators and well-meaning rescuers, it does not mean that they have been abandoned. More than likely, the parents are simply off looking for food. They will continue to respond to the food call of the fledgling for probably two more weeks.

In almost all cases, baby birds should simply be left alone. If a child, for example, should bring a fledgling home, the bird should be returned to where it was found. It is advisable, however, to try to place the bird in a nearby bush where it will be out of site from predators. The parents will hear the babies' calls. Don't worry that handling the bird will somehow cause the parents to abandon it — this is a myth. Birds do not have a well-developed sense of smell.

If you come across a fallen nest with young, try to determine where the nest came from and put it back in or close to its original spot. If you find a baby that has somehow fallen from the nest, attempt to put it back in. If the nest cannot be reached, placing the bird anywhere up off the ground but close to the nest might do. Should it "fall" out again, it's obviously old enough to be right where you found it, and should be left alone.

When well-meaning but inexperienced people attempt to act as surrogate parents and to take care themselves of baby birds, they usually end up doing more harm than good. Caring properly for a baby bird — and it must be done properly — is an extremely arduous, time-consuming undertaking that involves adhering to an especially complicated weaning process. Even if one is successful in raising the bird to adulthood, the chances are that it will not have learned the necessary survival skills to make it on its own in the wild.

The best way to increase the survival rate of birds that show up on your property is to provide suitable habitat and to address the very real dangers of cats and windows.

Let's start with cats.

Felines enjoy a veritable feast of backyard birds at this time of year. Fledglings, in particular, pay the price, but so do many migrant birds, many of which stop to rest and feed around our homes and gardens as they head north.

Even if a cat is well fed, it will still hunt. Unlike dogs, cats have never lost their killer instinct and skill, and are extremely efficient predators. The cat, of course, should not be blamed for following its natural predacious instinct. The cat's owner is the only irresponsible party.

Cat predation is a major stress on wildlife populations already struggling to survive habitat loss, pesticides, pollution and climate change. There are an estimated 90 million pet cats in the U.S. alone, the majority of which are allowed outside at least part of the time. Add to this the millions of



Felines enjoy a veritable feast of backyard birds chestnut-sided Warbler fledgling at this time of year.

Tim Dyson, special to The Examiner

stray and feral cats that roam our neighbourhoods and rural areas. It's no wonder that scientists estimate that hundreds of millions of birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians are killed by free-roaming cats each year. Cats also leave countless other baby animals orphaned and almost sure to die when they kill the mother. Even just a scratch from a cat's claws can be enough to kill many small creatures. A cat's mouth and claws contain a huge variety of dangerous bacteria that can be fatal to many animals.

If at all possible, try to keep your tabby indoors, especially from late April through early July, when young birds are taking their first tentative steps outside the nest. Cats benefit from staying indoors, too. They will be exposed to less risk of disease, parasites, predation, poison and accidents, and therefore live a longer, healthier life. If full indoor confinement is impossible, consider building an outdoor enclosure of some kind. At the very least, cats should be allowed to go outside only during hours of darkness, when the damage they can do is less extensive.

If you seem to have a serious cat problem on your property, you can deter the animal with a gentle spray of water from a water pistol or plant bottle. This requires a lot of work and vigilance, however. You may even want to catch the intruder and return it to the owner or take it to the humane society. This may frost relations with neighbours and may seem drastic, but you, too, have a

right and a responsibility to protect the animals that call your property home.

Protecting birds from window collisions is an equally serious matter. Judging by the birds that occasionally hit my own windows, and the many others I continually hear about, I'm not surprised that as many as a billion birds die each year in Canada and the U.S. due to collisions with windows. The main danger stems from the reflective quality of glass. Birds see escape routes or safety zones mirrored in the glass and inadvertently fly into windows. Even those that survive the initial impact may be fatally injured, too, as a result of internal bleeding. At the very least, stunned birds are at high risk of being killed by a predator while they recover their bearings. They should be moved to a safe spot.

Although there is no perfect solution to the problem posed by windows, there are a few things you can do to at least minimize the number of birds killed. Drawing the curtains or blinds will eliminate much of the mirror effect of windows and reduce the number of collisions. The downside, of course, is that this blocks the view of the outside. A good compromise is to do so when you leave for work or for a vacation.

If you find that birds coming to your feeder are hitting the window, try locating the feeder either closer to the window (within six feet) or further away (30 feet or more). When a feeder is close to a window, the birds don't have an adequate distance to

build up speed and therefore injure themselves more. At a distance beyond 30 feet, they are more likely to recognize the reflected image as part of a house.

Window decals or objects such as ribbon hung outside the window can also make a difference. They produce an interference pattern that reduces the mirror effect. Decals, however, need to be spaced within several inches of each other to be most effective. Even if you cover just part of a window, this is better than no coverage at all. Most stores that sell bird seed also carry window decals. It is not necessary to use a hawk silhouette.

Finally, a bug or summer screen placed on the outside of exterior glass will both cut down on reflectivity and act as a more "gentle" barrier, should a bird hit it.

The critical times for protecting birds from window collisions are during the spring (April to late May) and fall (late August to mid-October) migrations. Nearly all of the species whose populations are most threatened — warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, etc. — are migrants. While it's always upsetting when any bird dies as a result of a window kill, discovering that your window has been responsible for the death of a rare or endangered species is tragic.

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