

# Ask Maine Audubon: Just leave those baby birds alone ... please

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The beaks of two robin chicks can be seen poking up from under an adult bird in a nest in Oakland. While the chicks may appear needy, any “assistance” from humans can often be more harmful than helpful. *Staff file photo*

## Baby birds: They don’t actually need our help

I know it’s June when every other phone call or email I receive is from someone who has found a baby bird.

Seeing any wildlife that is young or not fully independent tends to trigger an immediate reaction in people: We must do something to help! But in most cases (and I’ll emphasize that what I really mean is almost every case), the best thing to do is leave the bird alone. Actions resulting from our gut instincts can often cause more harm than good, so always consider the often quoted motto: “if you care, leave it there.”

To clarify, I’m talking about scenarios for typical “perching birds” or songbirds, as that collective group is the one people most commonly encounter, and those birds have altricial young, meaning they are dependent on adult care. Other birds, like wild turkeys, have precocial chicks, which are mobile and able to feed themselves upon hatching. That said, perhaps the most important thing to realize with the majority of baby birds you’ll encounter is that they are perfectly fine. There are usually a very awkward couple of days in the lives of a

recently fledged altricial chick, when they are out of the nest but are not yet capable of sustained flight. These chicks are still being fed by the adults as well, so the combination of being on the ground with a mouth open for food would make most people think they need help. But, again, they don't! The adult is nearby, probably watching you from afar, waiting for you to leave so that it can go back to the chick without thinking it is leading a predator (you) to its baby.

Another thing to keep in mind with these altricial young is that they want to get out of the nest as soon as possible. The nest was a safe place to keep an immobile and blind-at-birth chick, but it is a very dangerous place to stay because of how easy it is for a predator to find. This is why we often encounter young birds that are out of the nest but look like they departed prematurely; they did leave before they became independent, but the adults will still be taking care of it for a while longer.

Remember, if you see a baby bird, the best course of action (seriously, 90% of the time or more) is to leave it alone. Even if you can't see the adults, just remember that's because they don't want to be seen.

If you do find a bird that is sick or injured, that is when you should contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Avian Haven and The Center for Wildlife are good places to start; and the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife ([mefishwildlife.com](http://mefishwildlife.com)) also keeps a list of licensed rehabilitators.



Three newborn robin chicks huddle together as one reacts to noise by opening its beak in hopes the mother bird would drop some food. *Staff file photo*





In a 2016 photo provided by the Maine Forest Service, a browntail caterpillar feeds on a leaf. The caterpillars' hairs can cause a painful rash in humans. *Maine Forest Service via AP*

### **Browntail moth: Make sure you get rid of the right caterpillar**

We are very lucky in Maine to be able to enjoy the outdoors without worrying too much about wildlife that can harm us. There are always some risks of course – a cow moose can do some real damage if provoked, and a number of biting insects can be quite annoying – but at least we don't have any venomous snakes. However, one increasingly common issue, especially in southern and coastal areas, is the spreading of the browntail moth.

The browntail is an invasive species, whose larvae (caterpillar) primarily feeds on trees like oaks and apples. The issue is that the hairy fibers on the body of the browntail caterpillars can cause an irritating poison-ivy-like rash on our skin. These fibers have even been known to cause respiratory problems for some people in areas with high densities of the caterpillars. It is because of this health concern that we've been getting a lot of people asking about how to identify them. It's crucial to make the right ID, because our native caterpillars are important bird food.

There are several caterpillars in Maine similar to the browntail moth caterpillar: They are large (a couple of inches long), hairy (think individual fibers, not fuzzy), and have webbed "tent" nests. The browntail caterpillar is best identified by the overall red-brown cast to the

hairs on the body and diagnostic two red or orange dots on top of the rear end of the body. This is a good way to tell them from the tent-making caterpillar we want to support, the appropriately-named eastern tent caterpillar, which has a single white line that runs down the top length of the body.

These tent caterpillars are an important food source for several species of nesting birds in Maine, especially cuckoos. Put down the blowtorch (seriously, too many people call Maine Audubon with blowtorch in hand!) and stop using pesticides; just let the black-billed cuckoos take care of these tent caterpillars for you. Browntail moths are definitely a problem, but make sure you are identifying them correctly before taking steps to remove them. The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry ([maine.gov/dacf](http://maine.gov/dacf)) has answers to many common questions about browntail moths including how to manage them in your area.

*Do you have a nature question for Doug? Email questions to [[email protected](#)] and visit [maineaudubon.org](http://maineaudubon.org) to learn more about bird walks, community science projects, and other programs about wildlife and habitat.*

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