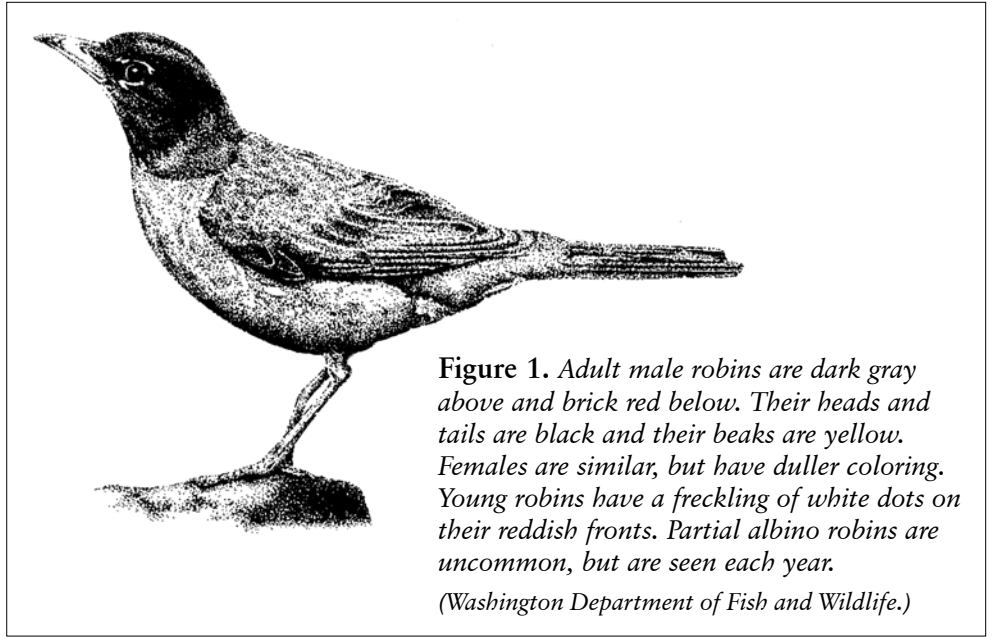


## Robins

The American robin (*Turdus migratorius*, Fig. 1), or robin, is one of the most familiar and widely distributed songbirds in Washington. It is equally at home in city parks and gardens, rural farms, woodland edges, and subalpine meadows. This North American “robin” is actually a thrush, and the English robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) of children’s stories is in a completely different family of birds.



**Figure 1.** Adult male robins are dark gray above and brick red below. Their heads and tails are black and their beaks are yellow. Females are similar, but have duller coloring. Young robins have a freckling of white dots on their reddish fronts. Partial albino robins are uncommon, but are seen each year.  
(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.)

In late summer and continuing on up until the breeding season begins in spring, robins form nomadic flocks that roost together at night and feed together by day.

Robins remain in the same area year-round, or migrate short distances in the spring and fall. Often the robins you see in winter come from their northern breeding grounds, which may be 300 miles away.

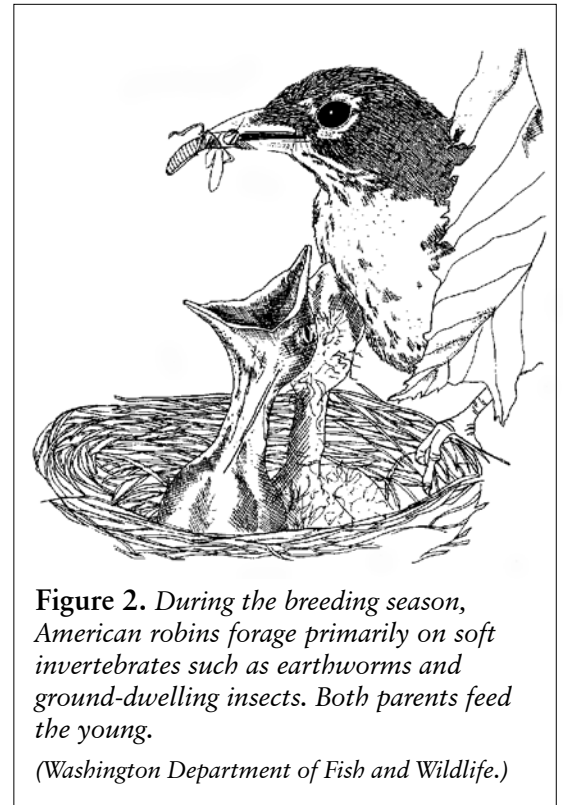
## Facts about Robins

### Food and Feeding Behavior

- During the breeding season robins mostly eat animal material, including earthworms, beetles, grasshoppers, ants, caterpillars, spiders, and snails (Fig. 2).
- Robins hunt on lawns, pastures, fields, and meadows, standing still with their heads cocked to one side as though listening for their prey, but actually discovering it by sight.
- With the decrease of available insects in fall and winter, robins feed on ripe fruits and berries in trees and shrubs.

### Nest Sites

- Robins nest in deciduous and evergreen trees, shrubs, and hedges, as well as under bridges and on windowsills and other ledges.
- Robins nest early in the year. Their first nests are often placed in evergreens for protection, since deciduous trees and shrubs may not yet have leafed out.
- Females select the nest site and do the majority of nest building over a two- to six- day period.
- Nests are often placed in the crotch of a branch, or saddled on a branch next to the trunk.
- The nest is a bulky structure of twigs, weed and grass stems, and sometimes string or cloth. It contains a smooth inner cup of mud, with a thin lining of fine grasses.
- Robins often nest in the same area, or a nearby area, year after year.



**Figure 2.** During the breeding season, American robins forage primarily on soft invertebrates such as earthworms and ground-dwelling insects. Both parents feed the young.

(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.)

## Reproduction

- Breeding activity begins in early spring in lowland areas, later at higher elevations.
- The female incubates three to four glossy, light blue eggs for 12 to 14 days.
- The young leave the nest after 14 to 16 days and continue to be cared for by the parents for up to four weeks.
- Robins have two and sometimes three clutches of eggs each year. Nests may be used for multiple clutches; first-clutch nests may be built on top of nests from the previous year.

## Mortality

- Robins have a high mortality rate, with up to 80 percent of the young dying each year.
- Tree squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, magpies, crows, ravens, and jays eat robin eggs and nestlings.
- In winter roosting areas, great horned and barred owls take a toll on adult robins. Hawks and falcons catch adults in flight.
- Because robins feed on the ground, young and adult birds are vulnerable to attacks by domestic cats.
- In the 1950s and early 1960s, robins suffered from exposure to the insecticide DDT because they ate earthworms that accumulated high levels of DDT in their bodies.

## Viewing Robins

Robins running over lawns in search of worms, perching and singing from utility wires, and bathing in rain puddles are familiar sights to most people. Robins sometimes nest on window ledges, beams under porches, in gutters, and on nest platforms provided for them (Fig. 4).

After breeding season is over, robins gather for the night in communal roosts. Roosts are located in trees, under bridges, and in large open barns, and may contain a few birds or several hundred. In fall and winter, watch for the daily movement of robins to and from a roost after sunset and before sunrise. Robins generally remain in flocks through the winter, and the breakup of these flocks in spring signals the start of their breeding season.

## Territories

The size of a robin's territory is one-third of an acre to several acres. The breeding pair spends most of their time there, on the nest or searching for food. The male actively defends the territory through all clutches. If another male intrudes, he will fly at the intruder to try to scare him away.

If that fails, he will dive-bomb the intruder and try to hit him chest to chest. This behavior is also seen when a male robin mistakes his image in a window for an opponent; homeowners often watch in amazement as the male robin beats himself silly against the glass, under the impression that he is attacking another robin (see "Are Robins Attacking your Windows... or Vehicle?").

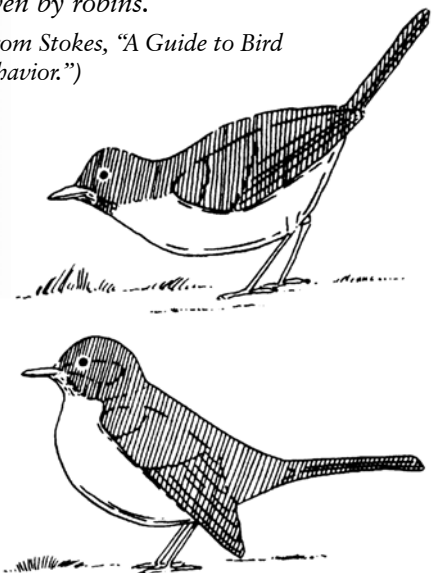
You know you are in a robin's territory when a bird of either sex sounds its alarm call at your approach. Robins are particularly protective of their nest sites when young are in their nests. Nest predators, such as crows, will be mobbed by several robins in an area where there are a number of robin nests.

## Nest Sites

When you see a robin perched or flying in midair with a wad of mud or grass in its beak, it's a sign of nest building. Another sign of nest building is a line of mud across the female's breast—she works mud into place with her feet and bill, molding it with her body. When foraging on a lawn, if a robin doesn't eat a worm or other prey immediately, but flies off with food in its beak, you can be fairly sure that it has young in a nearby nest.

**Figure 3.** *Two visual displays given by robins.*

(From Stokes, "A Guide to Bird Behavior.")



## Displays

If you watch robins over a period of 15 to 30 minutes in the spring, you are likely to see several different displays associated with courtship and territorial behavior (Fig. 3).

The tail-lift display is presented in situations of possible danger (Fig. 3a). The male or female robin lowers its head, raises its tail to a 45-degree angle, and repeatedly flicks its tail sharply while giving the *tuk tuk tuk* call.

The wing-droop display occurs just before or after an aggressive encounter (Fig. 3b). The wingtips are lowered so they droop below the level of the tail, and the breast feathers may be puffed out.

## Calls

The male's song is a series of rich caroling notes, rising and falling in pitch: *cheer-up, cheerily, cheer-up, cheerily*. It is sung early and late in the day during the breeding season. Some people confuse the song of the black-headed grosbeak with the song of the robin.

The *teeek teeek* or *tuk tuk tuk* call is given by either sex as an alarm call and in situations of possible danger. It is often accompanied by a tail-flick display.

Male robins stop singing after the breeding season and, except for a brief time when the shortness of daylight fools them into thinking it is time to breed again, do not sing again until the following spring. Alarm calls continue throughout the year. Female robins do not sing, but give alarm notes during the breeding season.

## Droppings

Droppings contain seeds and have the coloring of the foods being eaten at the time. Droppings are most conspicuous when robins are eating dark-colored berries.

## Preventing Conflicts

Because robins congregate in close proximity to people and their homes, conflicts occasionally arise. The following are suggestions on how to prevent and remedy these conflicts:

**Robins eating fruits and vegetables:** Home gardens, commercial fruit-growing farms, vineyards, and orchards often attract migrating robins. A small flock can quickly ruin or remove the year's fruit or young vegetable crop.

Protect fruit crops with flexible bird netting, which can be purchased in a variety of lengths and widths at garden and hardware stores; professional quality materials and hardware are available from bird-control companies and over the Internet. Secure the base of the shrub or the tree to prevent robins from gaining access from below (Fig. 5). Individual small branches containing fruit can be protected with an onion sack or similar mesh covering.

Row crops, such as strawberries, can be completely covered during the fruiting season. If the netting is to be used for several harvest seasons, it may be worth the extra effort to construct a frame to support the netting.

Scare devices, such as pie tins and commercially available Mylar balloons or Mylar scare tape, are known to provide temporary protection. Suspend balloons at least 3 feet above trees or bushes, or from lines between posts. Use tethers at least 3 feet long.

Attach commercially available red and silver bird-scare tape to stakes and stretch it 18 inches above the areas that need protection, such as newly seeded or planted garden beds. Twist the tape several times before attaching it to stakes so that the visible interval of red/silver is 16 inches. The tape should move freely, so that when a slight breeze blows it will flash in the sun. The space between tapes will have to be no more than 5 feet to be effective.

Because most robins will fly into a strawberry patch, land on the ground between the plants and eat the ripe strawberries from there, scare devices placed above the patch are not effective. Instead, place the scare tape between the rows. The tape should sag slightly but should not be less than 3 inches or more than 5 inches from the ground.

Scare devices need to be moved weekly (daily if possible) so birds don't become accustomed to them; they are also most successful if put in place before the birds become a problem. Always harvest ripe fruit immediately.

## Attracting Robins to Your Property

Ways to enhance your property for robins include:

- Avoid using insecticides. Nearly 70 percent of the breeding birds (including robins) in Washington eat insects as a primary part of their diet during the nesting season.
- Protect and plant trees and shrubs that produce fruits and berries eaten by robins. Examples include salmonberry, madrone, serviceberry, and hawthorn.
- Leave some "forest floor" in open soil, or mulched with leaf litter, to provide for ground foraging.
- Offer wild or cultivated fruits and berries on a platform feeder. Robins learn to take currants, raisins, small pieces of dates, and other dried or fresh fruits.
- Supplement the birds' supply of nest materials by allowing muddy areas to remain for mud collecting.
- Install a nest platform where it is safe from house cats and can be observed from inside the house (Fig. 4 or <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/backyard/construction/robin.htm>).
- Install a birdbath in an area where it can easily be observed and maintained.
- Avoid pruning trees, shrubs, brambles, and other likely nesting spots in the spring and early summer when robins are nesting. If you must prune at this time, carefully examine the area for nests before you begin, and listen for an alarm call given by robins.
- Keep your cats indoors and discourage other cats from visiting your property.

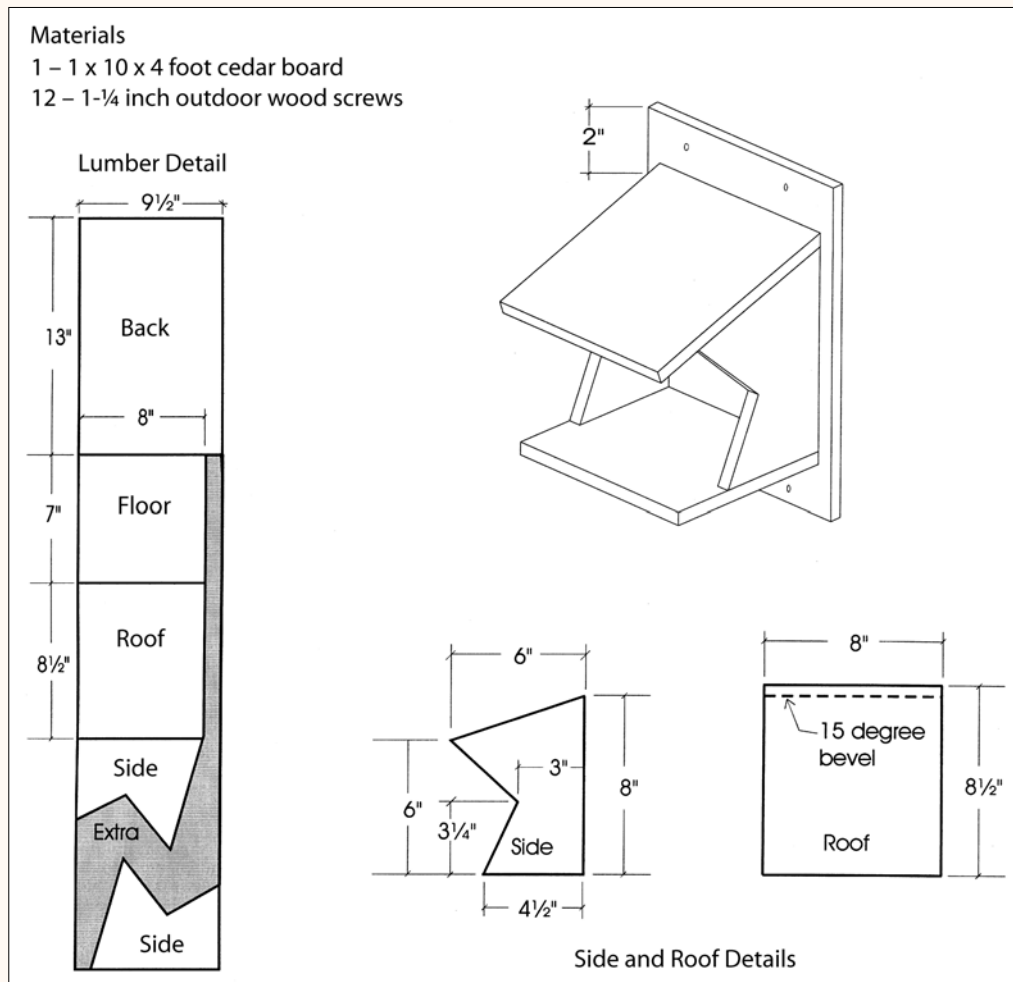


Figure 4. A nesting platform designed for robins and barn swallows.

(From Link, *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*.)

**Robins and windows—Tips to ensure safe flight:** Many robins are stunned, injured, or killed each year by flying into windows. This unfortunate event seems to occur because the birds have seen the reflection of landscape or sky in the glass, and have the illusion of space beyond the window. Problems with window collisions may increase after a robin has indulged in a binge of fermented berries, or when a hawk or other predator appears suddenly and causes a bird, or flock of birds, to rush to escape.

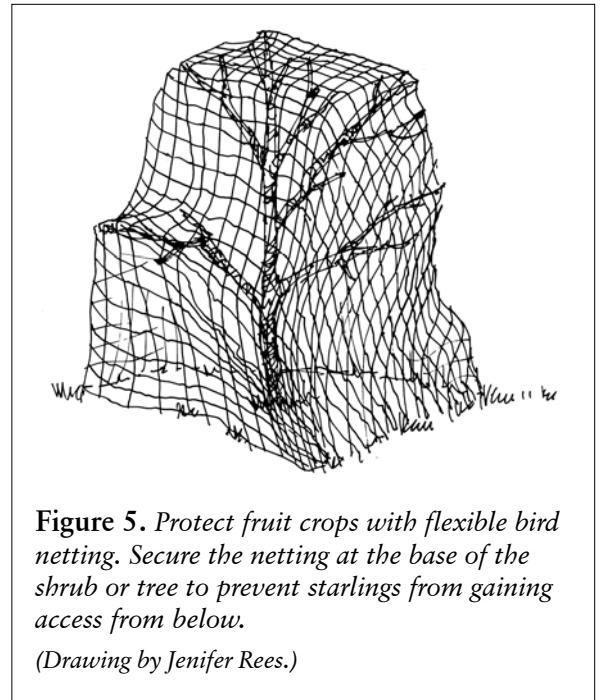
Catalogs and stores selling bird-feeding supplies offer silhouettes of falcons or owls to be attached to windows to frighten birds or cover the reflection. But these silhouettes rarely accomplish either job. Robins quickly lose their fear of a silhouette, and because it covers only a small area, it has little effect on birds heading for other parts of the window.

For silhouettes to be effective, you must cover the outside surface of the window with them (the shapes really aren't important), or use other patterns placed no more than 6 inches apart.

It is important that whatever you place on the window be on the **outside surface**; anything on the inside of the glass will lose its effect because it won't interfere with the reflection. Other ways to prevent window collisions include:

- Create bird barriers by covering windows with black bird-netting, available from nurseries and hardware stores (Fig. 6). From inside the house, the netting will be barely noticeable, and will not impair bird-watching.
- Rub a bar of soap on the **exterior** surface of windows, using a design that leaves no area 6 inches or larger uncovered. Dusty windows also help to cut down on reflections.
- Turn windows into works of art by installing commercially available window film on the **exterior** of the windows to give the appearance of acid etching or sandblasting.
- Install **exterior** blinds or sun shields.
- Hang strips of Mylar tape, string, or other material no more than 6 inches apart on the **outside** of windows for the full width of the glass.
- A robin that is able to see the landscape through a window that faces another window is likely to try to fly through the house, crashing into the glass. Closing curtains or blinds on one of the two windows can prevent this.

**Note:** These tips will not completely stop collisions, as the windows may still reflect the outside, giving the impression that it is possible to fly through them. But they do seem to help prevent at least some collisions.

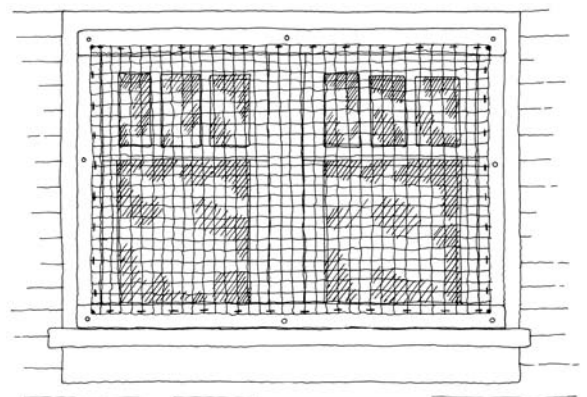


**Figure 5.** *Protect fruit crops with flexible bird netting. Secure the netting at the base of the shrub or tree to prevent starlings from gaining access from below.*

*(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)*

**Figure 6.** *A barrier designed to prevent birds from hitting windows is basically a taut-net trampoline held out about 4 inches from the glass. Many variations for mounting the net are possible. The simplest is to use thumbtacks to attach black bird-netting from below the eaves to below the windows. Alternatives are to install 1 x 4 inch boards along the top and sides of the window frame. Stretch the netting over the boards, stapling as you go. You may also build a four-sided frame that you can put on over the window, much as you would with a storm window.*

*(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)*



## Are Robins Attacking your Windows... or Vehicle?

Robins may fly into windows for a variety of reasons. Sometimes birds simply don't see the glass and attempt to fly through it. This can happen at any time of the year; however, window "attacking" birds are more common in spring because they become territorial during the breeding season.

Male robins in particular will drive away intruders with great ferocity. When they see their own reflection in a window, they may attack. Males have attacked red objects, including socks, handkerchiefs, and other items hanging on a clothesline, and ornaments and discarded toys on the lawn. Apparently they mistake the red object for a trespasser.

Although the above behavior can be repeated for days or weeks, usually the bird does not injure itself seriously. What seems to be more bothersome is watching these disturbances! So what can you do to prevent them? Some people place small paper sacks over the mirrors of their vehicles when these are parked; using a protective cover for a vehicle also solves the problem. Where birds are striking windows, see the suggestions previously listed.

Fortunately, these remedies are generally only necessary during the spring breeding season. After this period of hectic romance, birds usually come to their senses.

**Caring for robins that hit windows:** A robin that hits a window and falls to the ground may simply be stunned. On warm days, it is best to leave the bird alone; it will likely fly off after a few minutes.

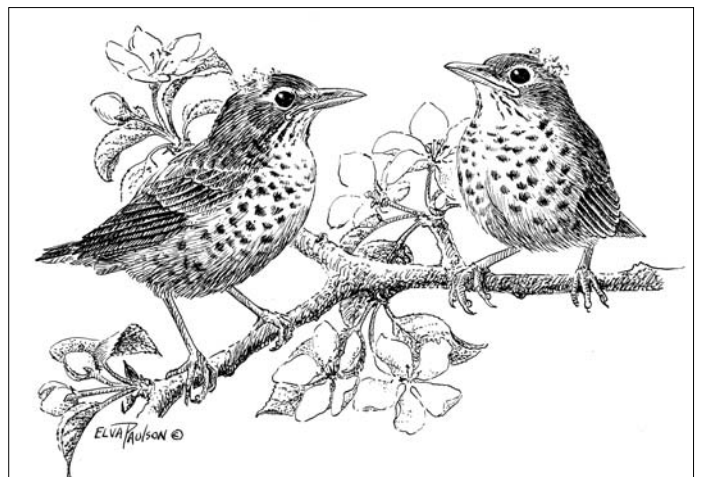
However, if the weather is cool or if house cats are in your area, pick the bird up immediately. Stunned birds are subject to hypothermia and many cats recognize the sound of a bird striking a window and will quickly come investigate. Place the bird upright in the palm of your hand, cup your other hand over the bird, and hold it for about five minutes. When the bird starts moving, lift your hand and release it near a tree or large shrub so it will have a safe place to fully recuperate. Wash your hands immediately.

If the bird is large or doesn't revive within 20 minutes, place it in a brown paper bag or container with air holes and put it in a quiet place. Then, when you hear the bird moving, open the container outside near a tree or shrub and give it a chance to fly away.

If the bird doesn't fly off, contact a wildlife rehabilitation facility. Look under "Animal" or "Wildlife" in your phone book or search the web for "wildlife rehabilitator." If a rehabilitator isn't available, follow the menu options provided on their phone message or on their Web site. (See the Department's handout "Wildlife Rehabilitators and Wildlife Rehabilitation" for additional information.)

## Baby Birds Out of the Nest

Sooner or later, no matter where you live, you'll come across a baby bird on the ground. You'll have to decide whether you should rescue it or leave it to fend for itself. In most cases, it is best not to interfere. The natural parents do a much better job at raising their young than we could ever do. A baby bird that is featherless must be fed every 15 to 20 minutes from about sunrise to 10 p.m.! This obviously requires a large time commitment on the part of the foster parent.



**Figure 7.** Young birds, such as the robins shown here are referred to as "fledglings" or "branchers," and typically leave the nest and move about on the ground and on low branches for a few days before they can fly. (Drawing by Elva Hamerstrom Paulson.)



**Finding fully feathered birds:** If the bird is fully or partially feathered, chances are it doesn't need your help. As young birds develop they soon outgrow the limited space of a nest. The young birds, referred to as "fledglings" or "branchers" at this stage, typically leave the nest and move about on the ground and on low branches for a few days before they can fly (Fig. 7). Their parents are nearby and continue to care for the birds, answering their demanding calls with regular deliveries of food. The scolding calls coming from the nearby tree are likely the adult birds, voicing their disapproval while they wait for you to leave.

Unless injured, the fledgling bird should be left where it is. Efforts should be made to keep cats, dogs, and curious children away from the bird so the mother can continue to feed it.

Unfortunately, this is when people often interfere and take a healthy bird out of the wild. Not only is this illegal (except in the case of starlings, house sparrows, and domestic pigeons), but it also deprives the growing bird of essential care it needs from its parents.

**Finding naked birds or birds with beginning feathers:** If you find an uninjured nestling that has fallen or been pushed out of its nest, replace it in the nest (Fig. 8). (Note that this behavior is actually adaptive for some species. This way, only the strongest of the brood survive and go on to raise young themselves.) If the nest has fallen down (common after windstorms), replace the nest in a tree with the baby bird(s) in it. (It is **not true** that birds abandon their chicks if a person touches them. Birds have a poor sense of smell.)

If you can't find the nest or accessing it is too dangerous, put the baby bird where its parents can find it but where it will be safe from cats. Use a small plastic berry basket, margarine tub, or similar container lined with shredded paper towels (no cotton products, which tend to tangle up in birds' feet). With a nail or wire, fasten the makeshift nest to a shady spot in a tree or tall shrub near where the bird was found. Next, place the nestling inside, tucking the feet underneath the body.

The parents will usually come back in a short time and will feed the babies in the container just as if it were the original nest. (Often, you will see the mother going back and forth between each "nest," feeding both sets of babies.)

## Legal Status

Robins are federally protected. Any permit to lethally control these species would need to be issued from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and would likely only be issued in very extreme cases.

## Books

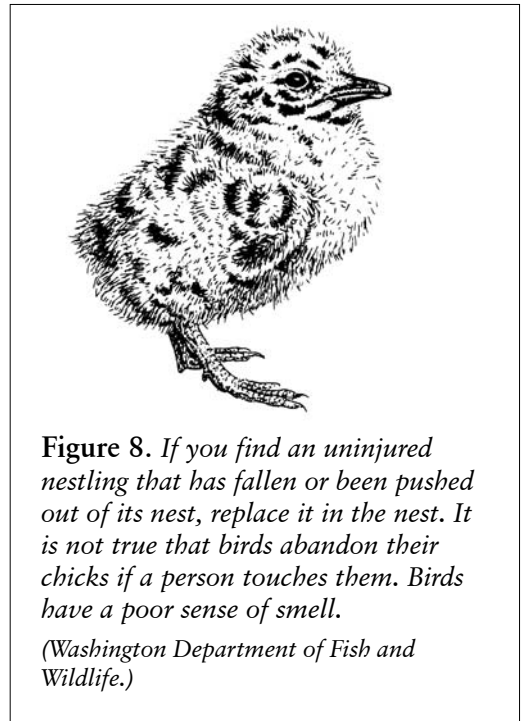
Ehrlich, Paul R., et al. *The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

Nehls, Harry B. *Familiar Birds of the Northwest: Covering Birds Commonly found in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Northern California, and Western Canada*. Portland, OR: Audubon Society of Portland, 1989.

Morse, Robert W., et al. *Birds of the Puget Sound Region*, R.W. Morse Company, 2003.

Peterson, Roger Tory. *A Field Guide to Western Birds*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Udvardy, Miklos D. F. *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds—Western Region*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.



**Figure 8.** *If you find an uninjured nestling that has fallen or been pushed out of its nest, replace it in the nest. It is not true that birds abandon their chicks if a person touches them. Birds have a poor sense of smell.*

*(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.)*

## Internet Resources

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage: [wildlifedamage.unl.edu/handbook/handbook/](http://wildlifedamage.unl.edu/handbook/handbook/)

Seattle Audubon's Birds of Washington State: [www.birdweb.org/birdweb/](http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/)

Wildlife Control Supplies: [www.wildlifecontrolsupplies.com/](http://www.wildlifecontrolsupplies.com/)

Adapted from "Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest" (see <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living.htm>)

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Illustrations: As credited

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