

Oh, let me rescue all creatures

By Ruth Ostrow

THE baby bird is in the corner, on the floor, its wings splayed and ruffled. It's making an awful squawking sound and feathers are fluffing up all over the tiny body.

I stand watching in desperation as it attempts to hop up on to something to feel a little more secure. I step quietly towards it, talking gently, gently, reassuring it.

I don't know what I'm going to do. I've seen friends throw shawls over birds in a bid to calm them down, then capture them and set them free outside. The baby looks too fragile to survive the shock. It has been flying around my lounge for over an hour, banging into windows, catching itself on things, and I'm alone in here with no one to tell me what to do.

Outside the parents shriek loudly, dive-bombing furiously along the deck. They can hear their baby inside but understand the perils of entering a house - where things are not what they seem.

While the baby is recovering, I go and stand outside to show the parents that I'm on the case. Welcome swallows are interesting birds. They nest in the same place every year. They seem to bond with humans, watching us as curiously as we have been watching them.

This spring has been a very special time for my family. It's why we moved to the country. We've had a box seat to the laying of the eggs outside the kitchen window, the hatching of the eggs, and last week's very emotional experience: the teaching of the babies to fly.

Three babies in all. We sat as mesmerised as any circus audience as the fluffy balls left the nest, one by one, and dropped, then rose up, in glory.

There have been birds in my lounge before. Mice in my kitchen. Snakes on my deck. When you don't know the animals individually they are just "silly birds", a "dirty mouse", a "vicious snake".

But when you watch them being born, get to see and share the parents' joy, the effort those tiny creatures put in, and the love, it's a different story. You don't feel so arrogant. They are not in your space. You, perhaps, are sharing theirs.

I get closer to the baby, praying softly. My body aches with the desire to protect, to rescue. I watch the television every night in this very room. Afghan refugees, orphans, frightened families devastated by war and hardship, staring into my eyes. People I cannot save.

And yet here it is. A chance to rescue. My big hand comes down. "Oh God, let me not make things worse!" I whisper, suddenly aware of the awesome responsibility I carry.

I have never held a baby bird before. Its heart is thumping. It keeps trying to bite and scratch me. I remain confident, knowing that if I let go, it will die. I carry it

outside in both hands. The legs are completely entangled in a thick wool-like ball of dust. I pull, but fear I will break the tiny bones.

I can see the kitchen scissors but can't get them without letting go the bird. I can't let go the bird without it flying away, badly maimed and tangled up.

I feel helpless. The parents are circling overhead. They no longer trust me, and I don't know if I'm making things better or causing harm. I hold the baby close to my heart, and wait.

"What's wrong?" says my husband, finally home, looking at my tear-stained face.

"The baby," I say. "Its feet are caught." He pulls at the cobwebs softly, meticulously. And slowly a leg is free, and the next.

"Do we give it water to calm it down?" I ask. "No. Just let it go," he says.

And I open my hands and the baby flies out, up, up. Then suddenly it is down and into some dense scrub in the distance.

"Oh God! It's down! Let's go look!" I panic. But my husband holds me back. "It's for nature and the parents to handle now," he says. "There's no more you can do." I bite my lip, fearing I'll only make things worse by interfering further, and go inside.

But at night I lay awake thinking of that bird.

There are only two babies in the nest now. Has the oldest one flown away, or did my baby die, alone, abandoned in the scrub? Deep down I know the answer. Just as I know that I should have done more.

And I fret, feeling sick with grief and guilt. Not just for that baby bird but for all God's creatures, trapped and alone, beamed into our lounge rooms each night, who we fail to protect or save.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 13 OCT 2001