

Learning to feed

When you are a baby bird you expect food to arrive in a parent's bill. Once you are fledged, this continues for a while, but the time comes when you have to learn to feed yourself. This can be a slow and frustrating process for onlookers and presumably the parents as well. I once watched a family of Jays – two parents and 4 youngsters – on the lawn amongst a feast of peanuts spread on the ground supplied by the adult Jays who had learnt how to unhook the peanut feeder and drop it on the ground. The young Jays stood amongst the peanuts and waited for an adult to bend down, pick one up and put it in their beak. I never saw one actually make the connection and pick one up for itself!

Baby Blue Tits need to learn how to find tiny caterpillars and bugs on trees – this can't be easy but they do get some help from the adults. The whole family roves around as a group and presumably the adults take the youngsters to places where feeding is easy. Their main problem will be rain and wind which makes finding food in the tops of trees difficult.

I always feel that young Blackbirds have a hard time – they often fledge when the weather is dry and lawns are hard thus removing a favourite food source – worms. In fact, I often wonder how young Blackbirds learn the worm-catching technique as they probably have never seen a parent do it – perhaps it is innate, or maybe they learn it from other Blackbirds in the autumn when they form loose flocks?? Their parents soon leave them to start another brood so they are forced to fend for themselves quickly. The result is that young Blackbirds often resort to the easiest source of food they can find – your fruit bushes! Strawberries, raspberries and redcurrants are easy and reasonably nutritious targets especially combined with a few ants.



Birds of prey perhaps have the hardest job of all. Many of them have specialist hunting techniques – think of the Sparrowhawk and its lightning attack on small birds – perhaps it's just as well that there are plenty of inexperienced small birds around to practice on! Young Peregrines learn from their parents who help them by providing suitable prey to catch in mid-air. But the Osprey is different – young Ospreys spend several weeks after fledging being fed huge amounts of food by their parents. They show no interest in fishing or in watching their parents fish. Then in September they set off for West Africa, without having caught a single fish for themselves! They are well-fuelled from their recent meals but they must need to feed en route, and remarkably most young Ospreys do survive their first southbound migration.

So next time you see a plump ripe Strawberry departing in a young Blackbird's beak, think of the hard time they are having and don't begrudge it!!

Rosemary Royle