

How big are baby birds?

I received an email a few days ago as follows “I’ve just had a strange bird on our bird feeder. There was a goldfinch feeding with it and I thought from the back view that it was another goldfinch as the wing tip and tail markings were identical, as was the yellow flash. However this one’s head and beak were merely grey. It was the same size so I don’t think it was a fledgling.” The answer was, of course, that this was indeed a juvenile Goldfinch and that once they have fledged and left the nest they are much the same size as adults.

Many people assume that young birds will be smaller than their parents – after all, think of ducklings! But whether young birds are smaller, or indeed, bigger, than their parents depends on what kind of breeding process the species goes through. For “nidicolous” species (nidicolous means nest-loving), when the eggs hatch the baby birds are completely helpless and poorly developed (altricial) and stay in the nest until they are almost fully grown and capable of independent existence. Such birds are pretty well full sized when they leave the nest, and can fly reasonably well, though they may have rather short tails. So baby blackbirds, robins, chaffinches, goldfinches, crows, magpies, jackdaws etc are all nidicolous and the young birds are about the same size as their parents.



A recently fledged Sedge Warbler showing its short tail



Lapwing chick – No 1 in the cuteness stakes

Other birds operate a different strategy – think ducks. When ducklings hatch they are immediately able to walk around and even swim (precocial), and usually leave the nest with a parent within a few days. They even feed themselves. So these young birds are much smaller (and cuter!) than their parents. They soon lose their down, acquire proper feathers and are able to fly. For a while they look like small adults, but within a few months they are fully grown and are the same size as their parents. So the only baby birds you are likely to see that are smaller than their parents are those like ducks that are “nidifugous” (fleeing the nest, for those Latin scholars amongst you).

This strategy is used by ducks, gamebirds and wading birds and is taken to its extreme by the “mound building” birds in Australia. The eggs are laid in a large pile of vegetation where they incubate and then hatch. The young bird has to fight its way out of the heap and then make its own way in the world – it never sees its parents.

One further category of bird is exemplified by the Manx Shearwater. The single large egg goes through a long incubation and the chick when it hatches is quite well developed. However it does not do anything for the next 70 days except put on weight, so by the time it leaves the burrow it is much bigger and heavier than an adult. However, it needs all that extra fat as it has a tough time ahead, learning how to survive without any help from the adults and flying directly to its wintering grounds on the ocean off Argentina.

Rosemary Royle