

Stay Away From Wires, Bozo

No, Marvin, you got it wrong again. Birds can land on insulated electric wires without harm because they don't complete a circuit. The electricity has better paths to follow.

For a bird to be shocked, there must be little or no insulation on the wire (sometimes true).

The bird must simultaneously contact the bare wire and a conductor providing a path to the ground, or another conductor with a different electric potential (a second phase of AC current, for example). Most high lines are sufficiently separated to prevent this kind of contact, although some of the largest birds may have a wingspan broad enough to touch two wires at once.

Marvin, however, is stepping onto the wire from a pole that touches the ground. The pole completes the circuit, so the electric current zaps Marvin on its way to the ground. A few glued-on tail feathers are no protection whatsoever.

We can't say it too often: Stay away from electric wires, whether they are hanging from poles or lying on the ground.

- If you see a downed power line, move away from the line and anything touching it.

- If someone is in direct or indirect contact with the downed line, do not touch the person. Call 911 instead.

- Don't try to move a downed power line or anything in contact with the line by using another object such as a broom or stick.

- Don't ride your bicycle over downed power lines.

- If you and your parents are in your car and it is in contact with a downed line, stay in your car. Honk your horn for help but tell others to stay away from your vehicle. Call 911 if you have a cell phone or ask passers-by to do it.

Cartoonist Keith Graves is a popular artist and author of children's books. He lives in Austin with his wife, Nancy, and the twins, Max and Emma.

