

Cuddles' Story, a Rescue

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The intercom at my desk buzzed, and I heard "You have to take this call - it's Rocky, and it's an emergency." It was the middle of the afternoon on a work day, and I was in between appointments. I picked up the phone, and Rocky said "Hi Genny - can you help? I'm at Bob's house [Bob is not his real name]. There's a cockatoo we just found that has been ripped apart by its mate - Bob found her on the ground, all bloody - her face is all broken, and her beak is hanging off, and she's in pretty bad shape. Bob said he thinks she is injured too badly, and he is going to have to put her down. I asked him if I could call you first." "Of course," I said. "We have to get her to Dr. Weldy right now."

And so began Cuddles' story. I phoned Scott Weldy, our incredible avian vet with whom I have worked for almost 20 years, and told him that Cuddles was on her way to his hospital. After he examined her, he cautioned me that Cuddles was in very grave condition. Her injuries were extensive - her lower mandible was completely mangled, and it was hanging by only a small piece of tissue. She had lost a lot of blood and was in shock. IF they could stabilize her, and IF she lived, I would have to gavage feed her for quite some time. IF she survived, we would see if her beak would regrow, and if it didn't he might be able to fashion a prosthetic beak for her. We were looking at a very serious injury, with no guarantee of a good outcome, and a very long rehabilitation time IF she survived. Was I prepared to do this? I laughed and said "You have to ask?"

The reason I could laugh at such a serious time was because Dr. Weldy does the same thing I do, except that he does it with raptors - he operates the Orange County Bird of Prey Center in California, which receives, treats, rehabilitates, and (if all goes well) ultimately releases injured and orphaned birds of prey. He also works with other injured wildlife and exotic animals. He is available at a moment's notice for this work, he gets no pay for his work with these animals, and he does not seek publicity because of this work - he understands this labor of love called "rescue."

Despite her sweet name, Cuddles was a fighter and she had a strong will to live. Dr. Weldy was able to stabilize her that evening. I picked her up the following day, and, armed with her medications and Dr. Weldy's very detailed care instructions, I took Cuddles home with me for her recovery. Her face was swollen and her lower mandible was completely gone. She was unable to eat. But she lived up to her name, and just wanted to be cuddled and cared for. She was uncomfortable with the gavage tube the first time, but after she figured out that I wasn't going to hurt her, and once she realized that strange thing sticking in her throat instantly brought warm food to her tummy, she became calm and completely accepting of me and her treatments and feedings.

In a few weeks her soft tissue injuries healed, and Dr. Weldy fashioned a prosthetic beak for her, attaching it with wire to the tiny bits of lower mandible that had started to

regrow. Unfortunately, the prosthesis did not stay attached, and we finally gave up on that approach.

I gavage fed Cuddles for several months, until her lower mandible partially regrew and she began to try to eat on her own. Since the two sides of her lower mandible were very short, and were not joined in the center, she was unable to crack seeds or eat hard foods. We provided soft foods at first, which she happily ate, and she thrived. After a few more months she was able to eat all of her normal foods again, including seeds, pellets, and small cracked nuts. Eventually both sides of her lower mandible regrew, but they still don't join in the middle. She has two pieces of lower mandible, which move independently of each other. She is able to manipulate them to eat normally. If you look at her from the left side she looks completely normal, but when you turn her around to look at the right, more damaged, side you see that her lower mandible on that side is pretty much gone - you can see right into her mouth and watch her wiggle her tongue. Since she isn't able to beak-grind in the way a parrot with a complete beak can, I trim her beak for her from time to time.

It has been several years since Cuddles came to us, and her recovery is now complete. Although she is missing part of her beak, she eats and acts just like any other cockatoo. Well, she's not like every other cockatoo - she doesn't scream or bite like some cockatoos. She lives up to her name and she is a real cuddler. She has chosen me as her special person, and she has made friends with the people at our sanctuary, but she is terrified of most other birds. I can't say that I blame her. I hope that someday she will again be comfortable with others of her own species, and we are working on that.

Cuddles is a Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. She is caged near other smaller female cockatoos of various species, and she now accepts their presence without fear.

Cuddles was obviously a hand-fed, human oriented, very well socialized bird, and she is a delightful pet. She apparently did not understand that she was supposed to bond with this strange creature they caged her with. She was not ready for breeding and she paid a terrible price – she suffered the consequences of a poorly matched cockatoo pairing.

Cuddles is the perfect bird for us to take to schools to teach children about exotic birds – she is gentle, she does tricks, and the children are fascinated with her tongue – not many children ever get the opportunity to see the tongue of a live bird “up close and personal.” Cuddles makes a lasting impression on the children who meet her about the needs of exotic birds in captivity. They have come away from our presentations understanding that parrots are not decorations – they learn that they are intelligent beings with feelings and particular needs, and that the humans who keep them are privileged to share our lives with them. To me, Cuddles’ story is what Rescue and Rehabilitation is all about. Stories like hers, and stories of other birds in need, are played out time and time again across this country.

What is Rescue?

The Gabriel Foundation’s website (www.thegabrielfoundation.org) says this about rescue:

“Rescue has different meaning to different people. At The Gabriel Foundation®, to rescue is to bring someone or something to a safe environment where they can be cared for by a knowledgeable and dedicated individual that is intent on improving their quality of life. Good intentions are not all that is needed; a life long commitment is necessary.”

While not a complete definition, it at least focuses on the essential “bring someone or something to a safe environment.” The Gabriel Foundation has been involved in many “rescues.” Some birds have

been taken from deplorable conditions, some have been brought by the owners as they are unable to provide a “safe environment” for them.

What is the Need for Exotic Bird Rescue – What are the Statistics?

People often ask “How can we believe there is a need for exotic bird rescue – what are the statistics?” and “How many birds are there in this country that need to be rescued?” I can’t honestly answer those questions with any hard statistics, because, as yet, there are no published hard statistics on this matter, at least none that I have been able to find in my research. I believe that, at this time, no one can honestly answer these questions with hard statistics.

No one knows for sure what the numbers are, although many express their opinions, and some quote undocumented “statistics” on the subject. The numbers quoted vary widely, and they change depending on who is quoting them. At the Gabriel Foundation symposium held this spring, Jamie Gilardi, Director of the World Parrot Trust, stated in conversation that perhaps there were 12 million birds in captivity in the United States. Some animal rights organization websites have estimated the number as high as 60 million, but they do not document that estimate with any citations or specific references to any research.

Other individuals and websites, who have re-quoted the estimate of 60 million birds in captivity in the U.S., have backed away from that estimate when asked for detailed data or research citations. The fact remains that at this time no one, not rescue organizations, not the pet industry, not animal rights organizations, not animal welfare organizations, not AFA, can tell us with any certainty how many birds are kept in this country, much less how many are in need of rescue. Still, despite the lack of hard statistics, those of us

who have rescued birds know that the need for rescue exists because we have seen it.

Those who rescue come from all walks of life - a rescuer does not have to be an animal rights proponent to participate in the saving of an animal’s life. This is work that is done quietly, every day, by all kinds of people – by pet owners, breeders, nature lovers, retail pet store workers, veterinarians, animal control workers, and other concerned people of many persuasions. All of us who claim to love birds, or any animal, must be prepared to do what we can to help that one bird or animal that needs our help. That does not mean everyone must become a “rescuer.” But we must not turn our eyes away when an animal in need comes to our attention – we can rescue, we can refer, we can network, we can contribute money, we can educate – each in our own way, for the benefit of that one animal.

I said in my first column that I will not refrain from speaking because it may offend some people. There are people involved with birds and other animals, from all areas of the animal world, including the animal welfare, animal rights, breeding, pet, and other areas, who claim to be rescuers, who are not. Here are some thoughts about what rescue is, and what rescue is not:

Rescue Is:

- A labor of love.
- About helping an animal, any animal, that is in immediate danger of losing its life
- About helping one animal at a time.
- Taking immediate steps to save an animal’s life, and then doing what is needed to provide for that animal’s placement where the animal will receive continuing care and where it can live a life that is satisfying to the animal.
- Tremendously frustrating, yet rewarding work.
- Work that will exhaust and perhaps destroy you financially,

socially, and emotionally if you let yourself get involved beyond your individual abilities.

Rescue is Not

- An activity engaged in only by those who believe in animal rights.

- A means to make a name for yourself on the internet or anywhere else (although some people seem to use it for that purpose).

- All about publicity or fundraising (although to operate a large rescue organization, such as the Gabriel Foundation, those are things that must be done if you want to continue to be able to operate).

- A political agenda (although the concept of rescue is used by some people and organizations to advance political ends).

- A business, and it does not produce a product to be sold or traded in the marketplace.

- An activity engaged in only by the mentally deranged.

- Something that makes you better than other people because you, and only you, can do it right.

- Something that makes you an expert on the needs of all animals or birds.

- About taking birds away from other people because you think you can give them better care.

Rescue has Nothing to do With:

- Making money (rescue is a money-consuming endeavor).

- Soliciting or accepting "donations" to support your animal habit or your lifestyle (remember that 501(c)(3) tax exempt status does not guarantee that anyone is a legitimate rescuer).

- Glorification of the person doing the work (it is not glamorous work – it is at times dirty, hectic, frightening, messy, frustrating, discouraging, and sad work).

- Attacking others who don't do rescue in the same way that you, or I, or any other rescuer, does the work.

I challenge anyone who does rescue for any reason other than the love of the animals, and love of the work you do with them, to do something else – you are in the wrong "business." ❖