

# THE STORY OF JOCKO

By Sue Ferrara, PhD

"It was a dark and stormy night..."  
Okay. It probably wasn't night, but morning  
Dark?  
If not dark, maybe the dawn's early light?  
Stormy?

The story unfolds on Lake Superior, off the coast of the Upper Peninsula near Houghton, Michigan, on December 28, 1953. If it wasn't stormy, the odds are good, it was darned cold. This part of Michigan could well be incorporated into Canada!

And, the rescuers in this tale were people who liked ice fishing! As reported by the Associated Press wire service, and carried in several newspapers across the United States, "a bald eagle was sighted... floundering around on the ice at Chassell Bay, in Lake Superior." The eagle was "walking lopsided" when spotted by fishermen.

A United Press wire story said fisherman found the eagle "lying crippled on Lake Superior ice; and believed the eagle had "probably [been] injured in a storm."

The eagle "wanted to be left alone," said the fishermen; "but Otto Ruotsi wooed [the bird into a boat] by feeding him raw rabbit meat."

Instead of being taken to an eagle rehabber, the fishermen delivered the eagle to Otto Ruotsi's shoe shop, in Chassell. Ruotsi decided to keep the bird and nurse it to health on Old Crow bourbon "whiskey and raw rabbits' feet." And when measured, the eagle had a wing span of 6 feet, 4 inches, and stood almost three feet tall. Ruotsi named the rescued eagle Jocko.

Today, an injured bald eagle would most likely not be tended to by good Samaritans, but rather by one of about 1,400 federally permitted migratory bird rehabilitators in the United States, said Alicia F. King, the Communication Coordinator and Urban Bird Treaty Coordinator for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Migratory Bird

Program. And today, an injured eagle would receive additional care from other professionals, like veterinarians.

One U.S. based organization dedicated to rehabilitating injured eagles is Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, located in Newark, Delaware. Tri-State opened nearly 37 years ago, and has a dedicated staff of volunteers who attend to injured birds; as well as a clinic staffed by two veterinarians and four assistants. The non-profit was born out of a serious need, and a serious accident.

According to Tri-State's website:

*"On December 26, 1976, during one of the worst winters of the century, the Liberian tanker Olympic Games ran aground in the Delaware River. Oiled Canada geese were found walking on roadways three miles inland, searching for open water. This spill was the sixth major oil spill in the Northeast region of the United States in a three-year period. Despite the efforts of many people, tens of thousands of animals died as the result of oil contamination."*

*"Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research was founded that winter for the purpose of establishing a multi-disciplinary team of wildlife biologists, veterinarians, pathologists, chemists and concerned citizens to study the effects of oil on birds and develop protocols necessary to treat affected wildlife."*

In a detailed email, Tri-State Executive Director Lisa Smith noted the center takes care of many eagles:

*"We admit over 2,500 native wild birds every year for treatment, and the number of bald eagles we have seen has increased," wrote Smith.*

*"In the mid -1980s, when the bald eagle population was still quite low, if we got one eagle a year for treatment, it was worthy of a press release. Now that the population has rebounded so significantly, we routinely admit 40-50 eagles every year.*

*"Quite a number of these birds have been injured in territorial attacks by other eagles because, unfortunately, while their population was recovering, their habitat was shrinking due to development. Now there are many more eagles but fewer remote areas near water suitable for nesting.*

*"Lead poisoning continues to be a significant cause of injury in bald eagles," continued Smith.*

*"Eagles will often scavenge carcasses that contain lead shot or fragments of lead ammunition, and they become poisoned from eating the lead."*

According to Smith, many eagles come to Tri-State with injuries from "electrocution/power line strikes" and vehicle hits. Eagles feed on road kill, wrote Smith, and so the birds "are at risk of flying into

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the path of an oncoming vehicle as they work to become airborne. “

Finally, “secondary poisoning is a serious problem with many birds of prey,” observed Smith. “Someone poisons a ‘pest’ animal, like a rat, or a fox, or coyote; when that animal dies in an area where predators or scavengers can feed on the carcass, they in turn are poisoned.”

And, birds at Tri-State are not nursed back to health on Old Crow and rabbits’ feet!

Smith said the feeding of an injured eagle depends on a variety of factors.

*“If the eagles come in debilitated, [the birds] often start with being tube-fed a diet that contains the nutrients they need. Then they may graduate to skinless, boneless chunks of chicken.”*

*“Once we know they are processing food well, we try to give them foods that are as close to what they would have in the wild – primarily medium-sized fish. It can be expensive to rehab an eagle! We also do a blood test on every eagle that comes in to check their blood lead level.”*

When an injured eagle cannot be released back into the wild, there are places offering them permanent homes. Those organizations have to be licensed and approved by a number of authorities, including Federal, State and local governments. The National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association also plays a role in setting standards and criteria.

At Green Chimneys, a day and residential school in upstate New York, students can volunteer to participate in the on-campus wildlife rehabilitation center. Primarily dedicated to caring for injured, orphaned and distressed birds of prey, hawks, falcons, eagles, owls and vultures call the Green Chimneys Wildlife Center home.

The 65-year old school was “founded on the belief that children will benefit from their interaction with nature and animals,” wrote Anne Cox, the Marketing and Online Community Manager for

Green Chimneys. The private school serves 250 students from Kindergarten through 12th grade at two locations, Brewster, NY and Carmel, NY. Both campuses are located in the Lower Hudson River Valley, about an hour north of New York City.

Paul Kupchok started working at Green Chimneys in the mid-1980s. While he was hired for the job of Director of the school’s Farm Program, he brought to Green Chimneys his skills as a Master Falconer and wildlife rehabilitator.

He says about five years after he arrived, Green Chimneys applied for a license to house its first disabled wild bird—a one-winged Horned Owl. The center’s first eagle arrived in 1989, six months after the March 24, 1989 Exxon Valdez spill. The eagle had been found covered with oil; was sent to New Mexico to be cared for by a veterinarian, and then went to Green Chimneys. The eagle could not be released because a piece of its wing had been removed.

“The bird came with a white head,” said Kupchok during a phone interview. “So, the bird was over five years old.” The eagle spent the rest of its life at Green Chimneys.

About ten years ago, Tufts University, located outside of Boston, called Kupchok about an eagle that had been found at an airport near campus. That bird was also missing a part of its wing and could not be released. Kupchok said only half of the eagle’s bald head was white, so he figured the bird was about three-years old. That eagle still lives at Green Chimneys.

The students are only allowed to work with non-releasable wild birds. “The children prepare their food and clean their cages,” said Kupchok. The wildlife center feeds fish, quail and rats. But there is a twist. “The kids will go fishing [at a pond on the Brewster campus], and bring their catch to the eagle,” Kupchok said, clearly delighted by



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the gesture.

The eagle has no name. "We don't name the wild animals," said Kupchuk. "If the kids need an animal to hug, squeeze, or name, we lead them to the goats."

Lots of farm animals also call Green Chimneys home, including peacocks, chickens, a camel and llama.

"We have seen some tremendous changes among the children who have worked with the wild birds," said Kupchuk. Green Chimneys was designed on Dr. Ross' deeply held belief, said Kupchuk that "children heal the animals; and through that process, the animals heal the children."

Visitors who walk through the front gate of the Elmwood Park Zoo in Norristown, Pennsylvania, will startle when greeted by the magnificent eagle exhibit. What startles is not the site of the eagles, but the lack of an enclosure around the birds. In fact, a visitor can get an up close look at the zoo's convocation of eagles, without the need to peer through anything. That's because all of the eagles who live at Elmwood are non-releasable.

The exhibit was built in 2003. At the time, the zoo wanted to maintain a focus on American animals, wrote Dave Wood, General Curator at Elmwood Park Zoo. The eagle exhibit was a win-win situation for the zoo and the birds of prey. The zoo administration "chose exhibiting eagles that could not fly [in order to build] a large, open-air exhibit without the need and cost of enclosing it," noted Wood.

Wood says the eagles there are fed a variety of foods. The zoo uses a commercial bird of prey diet consisting of ground meats. The eagles also get rodents, rats, chicks and fish. A local butcher sends over bones. Sometimes hunters will bring venison to the zoo.

Elmwood Zoo does not feed live. Wood, who has been working in

zoos for more than 38 years, says it can be dangerous to feed animals live. He notes that a zoo animal might be bitten by the prey and then need veterinary care. Or, an animal might injure itself while trying to capture its food.

Soon, Elmwood will house eight permanently injured eagles in its open-air exhibit: 6 bald eagles and 2 golden eagles. The zoo also has an eagle named Noah who came to Elmwood Park as a chick. Noah is glove-trained and is a member of Elmwood Zoo's education department.

As for Jacko, the Lake Superior eagle rescued in 1953, the United Press story said the bird "took a special fondness to Ruotsi—something rare for bald eagles" since eagles "are not noted for fondness to humans."

Clearly though, the eagle exhibited the kind of intelligence many bird owners come to expect. "The eagle even learned to carry a tape measure in its beak to Ruotsi so [the shoemaker] could measure its wingspan."

As the eagle regained its strength, Ruotsi realized keeping an eagle in a shoe shop might not be a great idea. He told a reporter he was concerned the bird might be "capable of flying off with sheep or even small children as the storytellers have said." So, Otto Ruotsi decided he needed to find Jocko a permanent home.

That's when John Rice, the publisher of the Houghton (Michigan) Mining Gazette newspaper, stepped in. Rice "believed the bird, as the United States' national symbol, deserved a good home." And so Rice reached out to Republican Congressman John Bennett from Michigan's 12th district. Congressman Bennett, in return, arranged for Jocko to be housed at the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C.

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Jocko's adventure from rescue to placement happened within a week's time, with Jocko being loaded on a commercial flight bound for Washington, DC, on New Year's Day, 1954.

Jocko rode in a "specially built crate" according to Kenneth Hamar, President of the Chassell Box and Crate Co. That crate was loaded into the "luggage compartment between the cockpit and the cabin of a Capital Airlines plane"<sup>2</sup>. The "hostess," Jane Guelick; when asked to describe Jocko's demeanor told reporters; "most of the time the bird just stared at the floor 'as though thinking deeply.'"

While Jocko was winging his way to the Smithsonian's National Zoo—a place where reporters wrote Jocko would live a "life of leisure"—there was one big looming question. Would zoo keepers continue to provide Jocko with his Kentucky produced Old Crow bourbon whiskey?

William M. (Doc) Mann, Ph.D.; director of the National Zoo at the time; assured reporters Jocko would be well cared for, but the eagle would not be imbibing.

*"He'll get rabbit meat, or a rat and a daily ration of horse meat, but the whiskey is out."*

*"Congress would have to appropriate the money for the whiskey. I don't think it will do that. We've been feeding birds here for 30 years without giving them whiskey."*

And so, after flying from Detroit to Chicago, and then from Chicago to Washington, DC, Jocko arrived at his new home on January 2, 1954. In 1957, Jocko was still at the National Zoo as evidenced by a Wirephoto released by the Associated Press on June 20, 1957. The photo accompanied a short caption marking the 175th anniversary of the creation of the Great Seal of the United States on June 20, 1782.

What ultimately happened to Jocko the eagle remains unknown.

The National Zoo keeps a registry of all animals that reside at the park. Jocko must have slipped in and out without notice. When asked to check on Jocko, Pamela Baker-Masson, Associate Director of Communications for the Smithsonian Institution's National Zoological Park, checked the registry records at the zoo and was unable to find any information.

"As follow-up to our conversation this morning," wrote Baker-Masson in an email, "I double-backed to check the records through our registrar. They do hold the records back to the years you were asking about. I'm sorry but I think our official answer will have to be that we don't know what happened [to Jocko]."

#### References:

1. No, not Snoopy. The author of this often-used line was Edward G.D. Bulwer-Lytton, aka First Baron Lytton. Lytton was an English writer, poet, playwright and politician. Bulwer-Lytton twice served in the British House of Commons. The line comes from Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel titled Paul Clifford. <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>
2. <http://www.century-of-flight.net/Aviation%20history/coming%20of%20age/usairlines/Capital%20Airlines.htm> Accessed 1 May 2013.

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