



A DIRTY LITTLE STORY



He arrived Christmas Eve coated from head to foot in a thick layer of dry mud; the once magnificent terror of the night had been brought to earth.

The Great Horned Owl was as dry as the mud; even the dirt in his mouth was dry and powdery. Dirt had been ground into his eyes and the right eye was injured with a large cloudy area indicating loss of vision. His head turned slowly and rhythmically toward the left as if he was watching a one-person tennis match in slow motion. Clearly, the bird had suffered a major blow to the head and had spent some time struggling in mud and brush. He had large burrs stuck in the soft feathers of his belly and was using all his remaining strength just to stay upright.

We administered an anti-inflammatory drug and began fluid therapy. Cleaning the owl would have to wait. Rehydrating fluids were given by injection and by mouth. The eyes were flushed with warm saline and a soothing ointment was used to ease the irritation. The bird was placed in our heated intensive care unit and the entire procedure was repeated a few hours later. By the end of the day, his mouth was clean and moist and most of the dirt had been washed from his eyes. Still, the damaged eye was cause for real concern. Despite our best efforts, it was unlikely that the owl would regain vision in that eye and we could not be sure how well he would be able to hunt should he recover.

I checked on the owl first thing the next morning. The bird was standing in a pile of dust, slowly turning his head, eyes closed. At least he was still alive. He had lost a little weight, perhaps equivalent to the dirt now piled around his feet, and we resumed administering fluids. As he was in no condition to eat, we began adding a high calorie supplement to the oral liquid. This bird was clearly a fighter and was becoming something of a handful already. We carefully removed the burrs but decided to allow the mud to flake off naturally.

By day three, the owl's condition had improved substantially. Although he continued to turn his head and kept his eyes closed, his hydration was good. He accepted our offering of whole dead mice and the dirt continued to accumulate in the bottom of his cage. Each day, cleaning his cage was a major undertaking. Every time the owl was handled, clouds of dust would rise in the air and settle on every surface. Once his cage had been cleaned, we had to wipe down all surfaces in the room and sweep the floor to keep the dirt from being tracked everywhere.

By New Year's eve, Dusty was gaining weight and his condition had stabilized. Several days later, he went to see eye specialist Dr. Nancy Bromberg at Veterinary Referral Associates. As we feared, the right eye was totally nonfunctional. The lens and the cornea had been lacerated and the vision was lost forever. The left eye, however, was perfect. Because owls rely not only on sight but also on their exceptional hearing to locate their prey, perhaps he still had a chance to return to the night skies. For the moment, we were happy to watch him regain his strength and spirit.

On January 26, one month after he was presented at our Center, the owl was sent to friend and fellow rehabilitator, Kent Knowles, in Virginia. Kent had the special cages needed to recondition a large raptor and could provide the bird with an opportunity to catch live prey. If Dusty were unable to catch his own food, all of our efforts would be for naught. The thought of this magnificent creature spending the rest of his life in the confines of a cage was disheartening; we desperately wanted to return him to his rightful place in the wild.

It took Dusty a few days to compensate for the vision loss but he was soon flying and perching normally. Would he be able to catch food? We could only wait and hope. The good word came toward the end of February. Dusty was flying and catching his own food as if he still had two good eyes. Soon, it would be time for the owl to return to his territory and freedom.

On March 14, Dusty returned to Second Chance strong, alert, and with a fashionably shiny new leg band, which ensured that, we would be contacted if he ever gets in trouble again. To our surprise, even his cloudy right eye seemed clearer. We could not wait to get him back to his home turf as soon as possible. He could hardly wait to take off.

That evening, two volunteers drove Dusty back to the golf course where he had been found. He would know the territory and feel less disoriented after his long absence if we released him there. After a short hike to a clearing, one volunteer got ready with the camera while the other opened the box. Dusty, however, had no intention of waiting for anyone else to get ready. He clamped onto the volunteer's glove with both feet and his sharp beak and the instant he was lifted clear of the carrier he headed for the hills, narrowly missing the would-be photographer's head.

After nearly being swallowed alive in a pit of dry leaves on their way back to their car, the two volunteers hurried back to Second Chance to tell the tale of Dusty's flight to freedom. He flew strong and fast into the evening sky, resuming his rightful place as master of the night.

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