



ONE LITTLE MIRACLE

It was Saturday, September 27, 1997 and the self-appointed guardian of the Rio pond, Robin Fenton, was not on duty. The security guard noticed a very odd looking bird walking up to people. He wasn't sure if it was a duck or a goose. Perhaps, he thought, it was a strange hybrid. Whatever it was, the guard had not seen it before and it was not behaving the way a wild bird should behave. He called Montgomery County Humane and the bird was picked up and delivered to Second Chance.



Although we felt sure this was a young Canada goose, her appearance was somewhat unusual. All her wing and body feathers were fully grown, but her head and neck were still covered with baby down. One wing drooped slightly; she was very thin and her bill was deformed, with the upper bill bent toward the left. She was far too friendly to be a wild goose and we immediately suspected she had been dumped at the Rio pond. She seemed very weak and pale and, although she appeared hungry, she did not eat much of the food we offered. Her droppings were black liquid, like India ink, and the odor was most unpleasant. I wondered what she had been eating and hoped that she would perk up on her new, improved diet.

By the next morning, Robin had heard all about the bird from the security guard. She called to ask what it was and how it was doing, and confirmed that it had not been on the pond the previous day. When the little goose was allowed out of its kennel during cleaning time, it would happily follow people around the clinic. When left alone, she would begin to honk plaintively until someone called to her. She would walk around until she had found the person and would then settle happily on the floor. Still, neither her droppings nor her appetite showed any improvement and I began to worry about the pitiful-looking creature.

On Monday, the goose seemed weaker than ever and the droppings remained black liquid. I decided a consultation was in order, and called a fellow rehabber and goose specialist, JoAnne Rogers-Luebbert, in Omaha, Nebraska. I said we had just received what appeared to be a Canada gosling and JoAnne said that wasn't possible. Canada geese are very early nesters and it was much too late for a gosling. Of course, it didn't matter much what kind of goose it was, she knew I would save it regardless. I explained the situation and JoAnne's first words were, "Get a picture." Of course, why hadn't I thought of that? An x-ray could tell us what was going on inside this little goose; perhaps she had swallowed a fishhook. It was suggested I de-worm the bird, just in case, and start her on antibiotics. I called on Dr. Piety at Wheaton Animal Hospital and the goose was scheduled for x-rays the next morning.

Because the hospital was very busy, I waited in the reception room while the goose was x-rayed. Before long, the technician approached and said simply, "two screws". He showed me the pictures and, sure enough, lodged in the bird's stomach were two very pointed wood screws. When there is bleeding high in the digestive tract, the droppings are black. I had never seen this before and had expected the droppings to be tar-like, rather than the liquid I had been seeing. Still, I should have obtained the x-rays more quickly. Now the poor little goose, weighing only two pounds, was so weak she wasn't expected to survive surgery. In fact, Dr. Piety said if she did, we'd have to build a shrine. Still, our options were to try surgery or euthanize the bird. The surgery was scheduled for later that day and I returned to our Center to wait.

The next morning, I called the hospital and, fearing the worst, asked if the little goose was still among the living. To my great surprise and delight, Dr. Piety informed me that, not only was the goose alive, but she was ready to be picked up. We had expected her recovery to take several days but, with the offending hardware removed, she had perked up and was doing beautifully. Once back in her kennel at Second Chance, we watched with pleasure as Screwball began eating.

Over the next several weeks, Screwy won the hearts of all who saw her. She was eating well and her droppings finally looked normal. Her color improved and she was gaining strength and weight. By October 13, she weighed 4.6 pounds, more than double her admission weight. A couple of weeks later, weighing 6.6 pounds, she began molting and her head and neck grew regular feathers. Now she looked like a Canada goose with the graceful black head and neck and striking white chinstrap. She remained very friendly and that, coupled with the deformed bill, made her survival in the wild doubtful. As I had often done in the past, I called on some friends in Leesburg, Virginia. The Rapson's keep a number of non-releasable ducks and geese on their property, making sure the birds are well-cared for and safe from predators. Without a moment's hesitation, they agreed to add our Screwy little friend to their flock.

On November 9, just over a month since her near-death experience, and weighing over 7 pounds, Screwy was delivered to her new home. We were all very sorry to see her go, but knew she would be much happier with open space, swimming pools, and other ducks and geese for company. In no time at all, Screwy had adjusted to her new home and was quite content with her new feathered friends. In fact, a few weeks later, we were told that Screwy had a suitor. Perhaps, come spring, Screwy will have her own family. I hope she teaches her little ones not to put things in their mouths! In the meantime, we'll be looking for a good site for that shrine.

Post Script: *Wild animals that have been raised by and are bonded to people have little chance of surviving in the wild, even when, physically, they are healthy. Similarly, domestic animals, such as ducks, geese, rabbits, are ill equipped to deal with the rigors of life in the wild. To "release" these animals is equivalent to "releasing" your cat in a field in the country. This is not a release; it is abandonment, pure and simple. Wild babies raised at Second Chance are always raised with others of their kind. Once grown, these animals are fully wild and have no attachment to humankind. Please, if you find a wild baby animal, get it to a licensed rehabilitator as soon as possible. If you have a domestic animal that you can no longer care for, find an appropriate home, such as a protected farm pond, where it will continue to receive food and have shelter from the elements. If that is not possible, take the animal to the Humane Society and allow them an opportunity to place it in an appropriate situation.*

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