



THE GREAT BLUE HERON

Goose harassment has become a popular, non-lethal method of discouraging large numbers of Canada Geese from taking up residence and the General Electric Corporate offices in Gaithersburg employs this technique. The idea is to hire an individual with a highly trained dog, usually a Border Collie, to chase the geese. If the geese are unable to relax, they will decide that the wide expanse of lawn and the pond are not as desirable as they first appeared and the geese will move on to a more tranquil location.

This technique works very well as long as all the birds can fly. Second Chance has received geese from time to time that were unable to fly away, but this time the bird was a "horse of a different color." On March 31, 2001, a Great Blue Heron did not fly from the dog and it was clear that its left wing was injured. Despite the bird's vicious beak, it was captured and brought to the Center.

At my first glance, the injury caused my heart to sink. The left wing was badly broken and the bone ends were exposed. If the bone becomes dry, it dies and repair is not possible. As I checked carefully, I realized that the injury was quite recent and there might be a chance if only we could get the heron to a vet for a surgical pinning. The only problem was that it was a Saturday afternoon and we would not be able to get the bird to a vet until Monday at the earliest. We had to do something, in the meantime, to keep the bone covered. The bone ends were jagged and could cause serious damage to muscle tissue. We decided to reduce the fracture (get the bone ends back together) as well as we could and stitch the skin over the break.

Reducing a fracture is a lot easier said than done. Bones keep tendons stretched tight; when we bend our arm, the tension on one set of tendons is eased and they shorten which causes our arm to bend. If the bone is broken, all the tendons shorten and, over time, it can become impossible to stretch them out again. With one person holding the bone at the shoulder and me holding the bone at the elbow, we began to pull the bone apart. Pulling with all our strength, we finally got the bone ends to meet. Because of the jaggedness of the break, the bone ends locked together almost like a puzzle piece. Next, we carefully stitched the skin over the bone and, trying hard not to move anything, we wrapped the wing and secured it to the body so the bone could not move out of position. We gave the bird fluids under the skin and started it on an antibiotic.

That Monday, the bird was taken to Best Friends Animal Hospital for x-rays. I wasn't optimistic! Not only was it a bad fracture but Great Blue Heron's are generally high-stress birds that can be reluctant to eat in captivity. After examining the x-rays, Dr. Hollifield called and said the x-rays showed the fracture lined up so well she did not want to even try pinning; she was afraid it might do more harm than good. I couldn't believe it! How could we possibly have fixed an open fracture? We were told to return in three weeks to see how the fracture was healing. All we had to do was find a cage big enough to hold him and keep providing 20 to 30 live minnows per day.

Over the coming days, we made frequent trips to the bait shop and tried to convince the heron that mice were every bit as tasty as minnows. The heron stubbornly refused to listen but was willing to eat the frozen smelt that we purchased at the local Giant at a cost of \$5 per pound. The heron happily consumed a 1/2 pound each day.

After three weeks, the x-ray showed healing had occurred, but not enough; we needed to wait another few weeks. As more time passed, we became concerned that, although the bone had healed, the wing would have atrophied from lack of use with muscles and tendons becoming stiff and tight. We decided to unwrap the wing and see how the bird used it. Of course, even in a room the size of a half-bathroom, the heron could only fully extend its wings if it was standing in just the right position. Fortunately, a couple of days after unwrapping the wing, one of our larger flight cages became available and the Great Blue was moved outside. Finally, he had space enough to flap and stretch his wings and our staff no longer had to risk life and limb entering his room to clean.

Several more weeks passed and the heron was eating us out of house and home. He steadfastly refused to accept mice, which we obtain free, and insisted on only the finest fish. We watched as the heron managed to "fly" up to the high perches in the cage but we couldn't tell just how much was flying and how much was hopping. Finally, on May 24, almost two months after he arrived at our Center, we decided it was "make it or break it" time. It was a beautiful day and the extended forecast was for good weather over the next several days. Since we do not have a really long flight cage, we weren't entirely sure how well the bird could fly. We took him from his cage, crossed our fingers, and let him loose.

In an instant, this magnificent Great Blue Heron spread his enormous wings and took to the air. He flew out over the woods, made a graceful turn, and headed off in the direction of the General Electric building. This is the kind of release that pays all of us back, in spades, for the long hours and hard work that is wildlife rehabilitation.

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