



AN EXPLOSION OF STARLINGS

It was a blustery winter day in January when we received the call from the Montgomery County Humane Society driver about several hundred birds involved in an explosion over in Olney. He asked if we might be able to help and went to survey the scene for himself. He called a few minutes later with a report of hundreds of birds littering the ground with varying levels of injury and could we help him gather them up? Two of our staff members drove over there quickly to a scene of horror. Starlings with burnt feathers, unable to fly, were running around an area with thick undergrowth and tall grasses in which to evade their rescuers. What a frustration to know we would not be able to rescue all those who needed it.

After a long couple of hours our staff members returned with over 100 birds, singed and scared. It seems they were sitting on a power line when something caused a surge or spark and a very large explosion occurred before they could lift off. We knew that burned feathers were only the beginning. Their legs and skin were no doubt badly damaged, and many probably had been electrocuted and were suffering with internal damage. After a quick triage we set them up in some quiet cages to calm them down after administering fluids. The next day we administered fluids and anti-inflammatory steroids to each bird and sent out Darlene and Lynne to catch more stragglers. They returned with more birds who needed medical attention and by day three our total was up to 147 starlings who came through our center.

We were thankful that it was winter because we had enough cages for all of these patients, but our concern was twofold: would they grow new feathers in time to make cages available for the baby bird season influx, and how bad were the burns on their skin going to be? Each day we saw advancing symptoms of burning on their legs and all exposed skin areas. Many starlings lost toes, or whole feet, but a one footed starling is not a lost cause so we hoped for the best. The death toll was hard on the staff because we labored over each and every patient as it arrived and in the days following, but we knew we could only do the best we were able.

Knowing that starlings only molt in late summer to fall, we had to make a decision. Pluck their feathers one by one to stimulate new growth, or euthanize every starling we had worked so hard to save. The choice was obvious. The onerous task began and each bird lost a few feathers at a time, got a good overall checkup and was returned to their cage to heal. Feather plucking makes new feather growth occur immediately and in two weeks we saw new feathers filling in the holes.

While all of these starlings are still with us, we have two groups almost ready to go and are anticipating the best results. They have new feathers, are minus a few toes, but overall look like starlings once more. This experience left us exhausted but reaffirmed that our purpose is clear, injured and orphaned animals need a place like Second Chance to heal, especially when it's we humans who sometimes cause their injuries. We still don't understand how this explosion happened and why, but we were glad to help get the majority of these innocent birds healed and returned to the wild.

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