



OUR FRIEND FLUFFY

It was June 9, 2003 when we received a call from a gentleman saying he had found a baby vulture on the second floor of a warehouse scheduled for demolition. Under the circumstances, there was no choice but to have him bring the bird to our Center.

During the many years we have worked in wildlife rehabilitation, we have become used to animals that mysteriously metamorphose between the time an individual calls us and the time the animal is admitted. Baby hawks turn into fledgling mourning doves, baby owls grow quickly into full-grown screech owls and baby squirrels lose their tails and arrive as baby rabbits. Knowing that vultures are usually ground nesters, we all waited with baited breath for the arrival of a baby Rock Dove, more commonly known as a pigeon.



You can, perhaps, imagine our surprise when the box was opened to reveal a baby Black Vulture! He was probably about a month old and knew he was a vulture and we weren't. He hissed and snapped at us to let us know he was a tough guy to be reckoned with which amused us no end. We did, however, feel guilty about having to have him "kidnapped" from his parents; they had found a great nest site. Safe from the elements and most predators, the odds of survival were high for this youngster and his first flight would have been facilitated by the somewhat unusual elevation of his aerie. Unfortunately, progress marches on and relocating the nestling was not an option.

We had no other young vultures for him to grow up with and were not able to locate any other area rehabbers who did, so we had to attempt raising him by himself. The biggest problem was that baby vultures are extraordinarily CUTE. Baby Black Vultures are covered with a thick, creamy down except for their head which is naked and wrinkled. The down extends up the neck to form a halo. Keeping human interaction to a minimum would be a Herculean task; one, which I am sorry to say, we were not able to accomplish.

In no time at all, Fluffy had been named and spent hours following staff, interns and volunteers around the Center "while his cage was being cleaned." It didn't take Fluffy long to recognize the hands that fed him and his original, normal aggressive behaviors disappeared. He found feet and, especially, shoe laces to be particularly fascinating.

As a wildlife center, many of our staff, volunteers and interns are vegetarians and Fluffy was happy to sample the tofu and slices of sweet potato that were often tossed to him. I tried to think how I could face my peers after producing the only vegetarian vulture in the world! It looked like Fluffy was destined for a life as a display bird at a nature center or other educational facility.

Around the beginning of August, we decided to move Fluffy to an outdoor cage where he would have room enough to fly and, hopefully, be weaned off human contact. On August 22, the door to his cage was opened and he was released on site. The people at Second Chance would understand when a vulture joined them to pick clover or do some weeding in our gardens. Maybe, in time, he would figure things out and, if not, he could still be placed in a safe environment. Every morning, Fluffy would be sitting on the roof or front porch waiting for us to arrive. You can imagine people's reactions when they arrived at our Center and were greeted by a large, black bird. Many people discovered that vultures were not as ugly as they thought and were, in fact, kinda cute. If we left a door open, he would quickly be inside looking for handouts (that tofu is addictive!). Of course, we continued to put "real" food out for him; he wasn't likely to find road kill hanging around the property. One morning, much to our delight, we spotted three Black Vultures in our side yard. The parents and a juvenile, about Fluffy's age, had arrived to see if there might be eats for them. Fluffy was clearly interested and approached the adults only to be driven away. This didn't look good. We quickly thawed a couple of frozen rats and tossed them onto the lawn. Our hopes were raised when we saw the adults chase their own baby away from the food; they were behaving normally and Fluffy was learning a valuable lesson. Nature is not kind and, in the wild, Mom and Dad eat first. The vulture family became regular visitors and Fluffy was clearly attracted to them. He still "mooched" food from us during lunch breaks but was often absent from the property. We couldn't help worrying about him but he always showed up at some point during the day.

By late September, a couple of days might pass without seeing "our" youngster. One afternoon, Fluffy showed up with vulture droppings all over his back! This may seem rather disgusting to most people but, to us, it meant that he had roosted overnight with his own kind. Being the newcomer, he was obviously "low man on the totem pole". His absences grew longer. Finally, he arrived one day with his adopted family. We called to him and he started forward only to stop in his tracks. It was as if he was saying thank you for the care we had given him but that he was back with his own kind where he belonged.

Every now and again, we see vultures flying overhead and wonder if Fluffy is among them. We hope so.

Reprinted from "Second Thoughts" newsletter- Spring 2004.

Copyright 2004 - Second Chance Wildlife Center, Inc