

Patient Tale: Speedy the Snail

The story of Speedy's epic journey began a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (alright, the summer of 2003 in the fine state of Arkansas). In that alien place, there was a fine looking young snail named "Speedy". (His real name was in Molluskese, which no one can understand, let alone pronounce, so he had to make do with the moniker that our Director Chris stuck him with when he arrived at SCWC.) Speedy had the world by the tail! He was admired by all who knew him, was a member of the leisure class, crawled on only the finest tree limbs and, most importantly, the young lady snails adored him! In short, life was sweet for our young friend, except for one thing: poor Speedy suffered from a terrible affliction. He had a really, really bad case of wanderlust. In a snail, this is an open invitation to a life of total frustration. I mean, just how far can you expect to wander if your top speed is only about a ten feet an hour?

Fortunately for our tale, Speedy was no ordinary snail. No siree Bob, he was not! Old Speedy, he had imagination, vision and a really burning desire to travel through more than one yard per week. Walking (or whatever it is that snails do) was not going to cut it! If he started out immediately, by the date of the publishing of this tale, he would have just made the county line! Nope, walking was definitely out. Speedy needed a lift, so he settled down near a road, stuck out an antenna and waited (did I mention that Speedy was also very patient?) for someone to rescue him from the depths of a small town snaildom and set him on the path to high adventure.

At length, the "Great Snail" looked down upon our hero and realized that he really was a most deserving snail and decided then and there to cut him some slack. This slack came in the form of a kindly couple from Gaithersburg, MD who decided to purchase a trailer in the same part of Arkansas that Speedy was trying to leave. They drove by, Speedy hopped aboard, and they were off. "Bye, bye small town blues, I'm off to see the Wizard! Yeehaw!"

It was only when the kindly couple got back to Maryland that they discovered their traveling companion. Did they wish Speedy good luck and a pleasant journey? Did they set him up in a swank snail hotel to wile away his time among us? Of course not! They thought that we did not have snails in Maryland and so rushed him over to SCWC (which is how this became a Patient Tale instead of a really cool story on *The Snail Wanderer's Quarterly*). The staff at the Center was a bit amused since we knew Maryland had plenty of these little guys but we did appreciate their concerns. Since Speedy might not have been a native species, his release could have proved detrimental. (It recently cost millions of dollars to eradicate an "introduced" snail that was decimating native plants in Florida.) After a quick staff meeting, they decided to keep him until we could determine his origin.

Now, you would think that it would be pretty easy to determine if a snail was native to this area, but you would be wrong! We checked with everyone we could think of and got nothing for our pain. We had no idea what specie Speedy was. In our defense, no one at the Center was an expert at dealing with snails and we could not find anyone who was. We tried everyone: zoos, entomologists, the internet, other rehabbers; nothing definitive! The only thing we knew for sure was that, if he was a non-native specie and we released him, it could be calamitous for native populations (think starlings, kudzu and killer bees).

We decided to play it safe and offer Speedy the hospitality of SCWC until we could figure out what to do with him. We did consider Fed-Ex-ing him back from whence he came but did not

concerns that he might have been imported on the trailer from someplace else (like Sri Lanka!). We did not know what to feed him. We tried numerous things: greens, fruits, softened cat chow (which he seemed to like, once), but we never really saw him consume much of anything. His accommodations consisted of a small aquarium with a thick layer of mulch and bits of woods. Each day he was misted with water and, whaddya know, he survived!

And then, enlightenment came! In early March 2004, a citizen arrived at the Center with a baby bird. As we tend to do when we have the time, staff showed her around and introduced her to some of the patients. We showed her Speedy and related his story and our concerns. She took one look and declared that he was nothing more than an apple snail and is very common in this area. Now in all fairness, even had we know, we still would not have been able to release him during the winter. May, however, was a completely different matter! The upshot of his being identified was that we showed good, old Speedy the front door (we actually showed him one of our front gardens) and wished him "Bon voyage!"

I ran into him the other day out along Route 124 with his stalk out again, waiting for another ride. He mentioned something about the bright lights of Broadway. I did mention he was patient, didn't I?

Wildlife rehab can be emotionally draining. We often receive animals that, despite our best efforts, just do not survive. We have treated two bald eagles in the past two years, who both failed to recover. A case like Speedy's, with such a high giggle factor, can be very therapeutic. If nothing else, old Speedy wins the competition for our Most Unusual Patient hands...er...stalks down!

by Vince Thomas, President of the Board of Directors

Post Script: Ordinarily, we frown upon anthropomorphizing (humanizing) animals, but this story was just so silly that we could not help but take a little literary license. I hope you enjoyed it.

~Chris Montuori, Director