



For the Birds

BY PUNITA KOUSTUBHAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES CHESSLER

Rita with patients,
left, American robin,
right, blue jay

BIRDS NAVIGATING the Atlantic flyway between their summer nesting grounds in the Arctic and their winter feeding territories in Central and South America encounter a host of obstacles along the way, not the least of which is New York City, where many run afoul of tall buildings, vehicles, litter, toxic substances and humans. 🌿 The city didn't have a wildlife rehabilitation center where caring citizens could take injured birds to be healed until 2005, when Rita McMahon co-founded the Wild Bird Fund (WBF). Its home is now a landmark storefront in Manhattan that includes a rehabilitation hospital and an education center. This year, the WBF will provide care for more than 4,000 birds, as well as various mammals and reptiles. Punita Koustubhan, a WBF volunteer, interviewed McMahon for *Wild Hope*.



Baltimore oriole nestlings

“I do it for the birds.

It’s a privilege to hold a bird in your hands, to be a part of their healing, recovery and release back into the wild,” says Rita McMahon, co-founder and director of the Wild Bird Fund in New York City. Watching Rita and her staff work, it’s obvious that they know a lot about bird anatomy, physiology, behavior and treatment. But Rita says there’s more to wildlife rehabilitation than book learning.

“Every animal who comes in has a story to tell, and it begins when it doesn’t know you’re watching it. When its focus is on you, it’s on guard; when it doesn’t have to worry about the predator staring at it, its body will begin to tell its secrets. It will fluff up, its wing will droop, it will hold up a leg or hang its head.” Rita’s rehab career started when she was a child. The veterinarian across the street from her home would treat any injured robin, chipmunk, pheasant or skunk Rita brought to him. She wanted to be a vet and was thrilled when, in her young teens, Dr. Bayard took her on as his assistant to administer anesthesia during surgeries. She was brokenhearted when he called it quits after she passed out for the third time.

Rita’s first rehab patient was a pigeon

she named Digiopolis. “She was just a squeaker (a young pigeon or squab), nothing wrong with her except needing to be fed, but she taught me a lot,” she says. As the squab turned three weeks old, there came a magic moment of realization for bird and rehabber. “I had a bowl of Purina Puppy Chow with seeds sprinkled on top that I was feeding her by hand. She looked at the bowl, looked at my hand, and then looked back to the bowl. She wriggled out of my grasp, walked over to the bowl, and started picking out the seeds one by one.” For Rita, that was the leap, the moment she bonded with birds in a way she would never be able to walk away from. “Seeing the world from the bird’s viewpoint, seeing how smart she was. This teeny creature saying, ‘That’s what I want, and I’ll just take it myself, thank you.’” That transition in the animal, the moment of learning and insight, is the voyeuristic privilege of the wildlife rehabber.

“The birds will teach you as long as you’re a willing student. It comes from the birds, especially the pigeons, who are so communicative towards people because they have a long history with us. They calm down in your hand and register that



Recent WBF patients. Clockwise from top right: American kestrel; saw whet owl; Baltimore oriole; brant goose; Rita with an American kestrel; "Ben" a one-eyed northern cardinal who is unreleasable and is now an education ambassador for the WBF. Next to him, a nestling cardinal begs for food.



Creating Bird Safe Cities & Suburbs

Surprisingly, cities and suburbs are home to more than two thirds of the wildlife species in the US. This close proximity provides opportunities for many people to see and experience nature, yet we imperil our avian friends every day with our infrastructures and choices. Luckily, there are solutions we can implement in our homes and communities today to safeguard birds.

PROBLEM: More than 3 billion birds are killed every year by household pets, particularly cats.

SOLUTION: Awareness! Keep cats indoors as much as possible and utilize special collars that can alert birds to the presence of cats such as BirdBeSafe™ collar and CatBib™. Bells and training tend to be less effective, but can be good adjuncts.

PROBLEM: Nearly 1 billion birds are killed every year in collisions with buildings, most notably low rise and residential complexes in suburbs.

SOLUTION: Installing window shades that break the reflective surface of the glass appears to be the most effective strategy. Bird-friendly colors on the sides of buildings that break the sky-like monotony of many buildings allow birds to avoid strikes, a practice that is now encouraged by the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED rating system. Also effective but more expensive is installing bird-friendly glass in high collision areas. Another window modifying strategy is applying products such as Liquid UV™, which although invisible to humans allows birds to see and avoid windows. Also, the use of decals is a cheap, albeit less effective, mitigating strategy.

PROBLEM: Lack of vegetation, non-native plants, and pesticide use reduce food sources for migrating and native birds.

SOLUTION: According to the Smithsonian, planting native vegetation, especially native trees, provides a sustainable food source of insects for birds living and migrating through urban areas. Remember, 96% of birds rear their young on insects. Additionally, the National Wildlife Federation estimates that a single native oak can provide habitat for 534 caterpillar species, whereas a non-native tree like ginkgo provides habitat for only one species. Finally, reducing pesticides and adopting integrated pest management strategies allows birds to act as natural pest controllers while feeding their young.

PROBLEM: I found an injured bird, what can I do?

SOLUTION: While most birds can recover from injuries on their own, some need our help. First steps include keeping the bird warm and offering fluids. However, migratory birds are illegal to keep as pets in the US and can only be cared for by a federally licensed migratory bird rehabilitator, so it is imperative to find one in your area. Such rehabilitators can be found on the websites of these agencies and organizations: National Fish and Wildlife Service, the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council and the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association. You can also work with your local wildlife rescue center to become a rehabilitator yourself. —P. Koustabhan



Top: Hand feeding blue jay and starling nestlings. Bottom: A hungry nestling blue jay. Left: Rita and volunteer rehabbers splint a pigeon's broken leg.



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Number of bird species that stop over in Central Park during migration

90,000

Number of birds that die each year in Manhattan in collisions with buildings



A rehabilitated red-tailed hawk is released in Central Park.

you're actually helping them. It's a gift from the animal when they include you in their world." Rita recalls the case of a big, healthy, angry red-tailed hawk who had stepped in wet tar. "Raptors need their talons to catch prey. Without them, they can't even perch. This large female's feet had closed up into tight tar balls."

Rita and the staff restrained the hawk and began to gingerly dab her feet with mayonnaise on a long Q-tip to avoid being taloned. "As the tar began to come off, we saw that she had stopped struggling and was trying to stretch out her toes. Because she was now cooperating, we could skip the dainty Q-tips and instead use gauze pads to slather her feet." They didn't want to restrain her for too long, and so took a break. "The next day, once we got her out of the cage and laid her down on the treatment table, she stretched her legs out to us and patiently waited for her pedicure to continue." Once her feet were clean, she was released the same day.

When Rita first started the WBF, she often noticed birds lying down in their

seed bowls. "'Silly bird,' I'd say. 'Why are you lying in your seed bowl?'" Silly me, I didn't wait for an answer. It came months later, when I realized that all these birds had leg or foot problems. Lying in a bowl of seeds, the bird's weight is supported and the injured limb gently cradled. Seed-bowl therapy is now standard procedure, especially for fractured femurs, which can't be splinted."

People sometimes ask Rita, what's the point of saving one pigeon, one blue jay, one squirrel or one turtle? "You do it for that individual animal and for the person who found it and has gone to the trouble of bringing it in for help," she says. "But it's true. Unless you're dealing with an endangered species, what we do isn't going to directly affect the fate of the species. But treating a lowly sparrow with care and compassion, giving it value, will help change people's attitude toward the wildlife we share an environment with. And that can make a huge difference." **WH**

To learn more about the Wild Bird Fund, read stories about some of their patients and find out about their educational activities, visit www.wildbirdfund.org.