

# “Lucky Landing”

## The Story of an Injured Gannet in Need of Rescue

By: Juris Benjamin

It was a typical October day on the ocean just off of Sable Island, Nova Scotia. The weather was cool and damp with a few rain showers. It was first thing in the morning when I was out working on the back deck of the ship. My name is Juris Benjamin and I am a student at the Marine Institute of Memorial University. I am taking Nautical Science. This is my story of an amazing encounter I had with an injured northern gannet while I was a cadet at sea.

Suddenly and awkwardly this large white bird crash-landed on the deck next to one of my fellow shipmates. I ran over and immediately recognized it as a Northern Gannet. I knew it well because I've spent hours watching them in amazement off the east coast of Newfoundland. I'm mesmerized by the way they dive from dizzying heights to catch fish. I couldn't believe one of these incredible birds was right in front of me, and why? Immediately the gannet tried to get up on its feet but was clearly hurt and plopped back down on the dirty deck. Something was clearly wrong!



Above: The gannet shortly after it landed on deck.

I approached cautiously trying not to startle the gannet but it did not seem to mind. It attempted to stand again, that's when I saw a large deep cut on the breast near the leg. The cut was close to five centimeters long and over one centimeter deep. There was a substantial amount of blood on its feathers as well as on deck. I knew at this point the gannet was in a serious situation and had luckily landed on our ship as its Island of refuge. I don't have any experience with bird rescue, especially large sea birds. But I knew I was going to do what ever I could to help. I immediately went to gather information to find out how. I emailed my girlfriend Nancy who has worked closely with sea birds. She promptly began emailing anyone she knew that could help.

I made the decision to leave the gannet were it was until I heard back from anyone who knew what the best course of action was. “Ebert”, is the

name given to the gannet. Named by my coworker that was almost struck by gannet during its the emergency landing. Ebert lay on the deck all day and attempted to move several times but was in too much pain. It wasn't until early evening when I started to get some information and guidance. One important fact I found out was that if a bird like this allowed you to approach it and was on the deck of a ship, it was really hurt. This is not normal behavior for a sea bird.

Later that night the weather changed for the worst, it was raining heavily and the seas picked up. Ebert was still out on the dirty deck and was now at risk of being washed away. I couldn't leave Ebert outside; I knew he needed shelter. After some great help and advice that I received from return emails from some very knowledgeable people. I made the decision to build him a shelter and get him to a warm dry place. It was late at night and I scrounged up anything I could, I found some cardboard boxes and a bunch of clean rags and duct tape. Myself with the help of a coworker, Cynthia, built a make shift shelter which included air vents and a two doors. With a couple of towels and our safety glasses on, we carefully approached Ebert in the storm. I wrapped the small towel around Ebert's head while Cynthia wrapped the large towel around his wings and body. Neither one of us has ever done this before, we were rather nervous handling such a large bird. Thankfully it worked out fine. Just before we put Ebert in to his shelter I was able to examine the wound and clean it. It was a bad cut, straight and deep but at least it had stopped bleeding. We

cleaned it with water and a clean cloth then put him in the shelter. We then closed the door and moved him to a quiet dry place.



Above: The shelter we built for Ebert

The next morning I went to see how Ebert was doing and he seemed ok, he was resting nicely and didn't seem stressed about being in his shelter. I opened the top door and allowed him to stand up and look around. He didn't want to leave; he just stretched his legs then layback down to continue resting. I left him in peace and quiet, checking on him periodically during the day. In the evening I returned and noticed that he did not drink any of the water that I left for him. I figured he had to be dehydrated, especially with all the stress. I thought about attempting to give him water, I was told to try with a tube down the throat but there was nothing that would work around. So Cynthia and I tried the only thing we could, we wrapped him up with towels same as before and I opened his beak. We then poured water down hoping he would swallow it, it only slightly worked, if at all, I knew this because I was wearing most of the water on my shirt. This wasn't going to be as easy as I thought. I examined the wound; it had now dried up and was slowly sealing itself. This was great news; it was then that I knew he

had a chance. We carefully put Ebert back in his shelter for another night.

It has now been 48 hours since Ebert landed on the deck and he seemed to be regaining some energy but not much. He wouldn't eat any of the canned fish we tried to feed him and has barely had any water. I was thinking that it might be best if we release him so he can at least find food and hydrate himself. The only problem was that on this day the wind was gusting around 110 km/hr and the seas were reaching 10 meters or more. This was no day to attempt to release a healing bird. In fact it was so stormy I had to move Ebert from his sheltered area outdoors in to the only place inside he could go, my cabin. I didn't know what to do about the dehydration except try to pour water down his beak again. Same thing as before, we were only slightly successful. I was concerned.

Later in the afternoon right in the middle of the storm something unbelievably lucky happened. I was on the bridge standing watch when we spotted what looked to be a derelict liferaft in the water. We turned the ship around and sure enough it was. This is no regular occurrence on board any ship. This is considered an emergency situation and an immediate rescue was ordered. There is a possibility that people need help aboard the raft. Over the next hour I was on deck battling crashing waves over the side of the ship to help make a heroic rescue of the raft. I felt like I was on the show "deadliest catch" throwing the grapple at this raft to try to snag it while giant waves crashed over us. In the end, thankfully, there

wasn't anyone on board. I don't know if it was fate or what but what I found contained within the raft was an empty water bladder used to collect water. It looked just like an IV bag with tubes and everything. This is exactly what Ebert needed so he could get water. I immediately asked Cynthia to help me attempt to give Ebert some water with this new bladder and tube. We wrapped Ebert up again and we carefully slide the tube down his throat and started to give him water, it worked perfectly!

Later in the evening I returned check on Ebert and to feed him some more water. To my amazement Ebert was full of life. He was standing up looking around; he even tried to climb out of the box. I knew for sure that the water helped and he was noticeably gaining strength. Ebert even began squawking at us when we picked him up, this is something I hadn't heard before. By now it was dark outside and the storm began to subside. I looked at the forecast for the night and next day and it was calling for calm weather and sun. I made the decision that at first light we were going to attempt to release Ebert back to his home, the sea. So I went to sleep with a large sea bird in the corner of my cabin. I couldn't help but imagine what it would have been like if he got out of the box in the middle of the night, that would have been a rude awakening.

It was half past six in the morning and we were all up for the big moment. I brought Ebert in his shelter to the back deck of the ship where he could easily jump back in to the sea. He eagerly climbed out of his

box and on to the deck. He stretched his legs and wings. He wasn't guarding either, we looked at the area where he was cut and we could barely even see anything, it had sealed up tight. Ebert then walked to the stern of the ship and stood right at the edge. He stopped and turned to face all of us, as though he was contemplated staying or maybe he was thanking us. I managed to snap a photograph moments before he jumped back in to the sea.

I watched him swim happily and effortlessly away in to the beautiful sunrise. I watched for as long as I could see him with my naked eye. Finally through the binoculars a few minutes later I watched him take flight, what a moment. We were all smiling ear to ear when we saw this. We did a good thing for this gannet.

I spent the rest of the day watching all the other migrating gannets fly around, dive and fish. I couldn't help but wonder if one of them was Ebert. From this day forward, when I'm out hiking on the east coast trail of Newfoundland, every northern gannet I see I will wonder if it is Ebert.



Above: Ebert walking to the sea just after his release.

Below: Ebert moments before he jumped back in to the sea.

