

Public concern for a suffering duck

Birds I View

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Distressed black duck at Mundy Pond (photo: W. Montevecchi)

A message on my phone requested nets and gear to help catch a suffering black duck in Mundy Pond that had a large yellow plastic ring around its neck and wedged between its upper and lower bills. By the time I picked up the message a couple of days later, Toby Rivers had made many calls to rescue the distressed duck.

The most effective call was to Ted Blades at CBC Radio. Their discussion of suffering animal's plight struck a chord of public concern. CBC producer Susan Wooldridge, Jeff Gilhooly and roady Cecil Hare were on to the duck's dilemma as well, and it was a call from Susan in the midst of a lab meeting at Memorial University that prompted me to action.

The capture attempts

Before dawn the following morning, with pole nets, a noose carpet, extendable salmon fishing poles with nooses on their tips and bags of bread, seed, duck food, I was at Mundy Pond searching for the beleaguered bird. Trying to bait the birds to land, I was shocked by the skittishness of these wild black ducks. As I laid a pole net near the bank, a huge flush of birds took flight and the wary flock remained well offshore.

In time, things settled. Pierre Ryan, who had stopped by, sighted the horrifically encumbered duck. The animal moved near shore and there were fleeting opportunities for capture, but the duck was simply too stressed to tolerate approach. It was clear to me that if the duck was going to be caught it would have to commit itself rather than being pursued.

Captures of this nature are not unlike fly fishing for salmon. The primary determinant of a catch has as much to do with fish as with the fisher. In essence, capture depends mostly on the animal making a behavioural commitment. We can only help to coax that response.

The concerned

Apprehensive people stopped by to check on the duck. Many offered advice. Others offered to help. Some brought food to help attract the bird. One fellow brought a small hand wire basket with which to catch the bird. A woman from Quidi Vidi brought huge bags of cracked corn and bread. The heart-warming outpouring of compassion for the stricken animal reflected a basic human response to the distress of others – human or otherwise.

Lots of eyes and vigilance

Most help came from from vigilance. As I was about to leave, a most accommodating gentleman yelled across the pond that the disabled bird was in a small pond near where I stood.

Cautiously I approached and though the duck was stressed by my presence, it was evident that animal wanted to depart by swimming under the bridge that I was laying on. This was my chance. I knew it. The duck knew it. Quickly and as unobtrusively as possible, I extended the noose pole toward the duck. Each time it neared the noose it flushed back. I have caught many wild birds using noose-poles and felt certain that with enough time the bird would accept the monofilament noose and thin pole as it might a moving stick.

The duck was highly agitated. As people walked by or came to the pond's edge with dogs, the duck's adrenalin level undoubtedly shot up. From experience, I knew that when disturbance occurs there is just as much chance that capture possibilities will improve as there is that they will deteriorate. As usual, both things happened.

I stayed completely focused on the duck, its behaviour and movements, and ignored all else. Yet I just could not quite engage the duck before the disturbance from onlookers was too much the poor animal took flight.

The next morning I returned. After an hour with no sign of the duck, I felt against hope that it was now a body search. I scoured the reeds and grasses and small streams around the pond's edge – nothing. A few hours later, I left to return to my day job at university.

The conclusion

Driving away, my cell phone rang – “We've found the duck.” Quick U-turn and zip back where a fellow had seen the duck laying on its side in the distant corner of the pond. Though I knew what “laying on its side” meant, I found myself walking faster and faster imagining a bit life, a glimmer of hope.

The floating duck was not long dead. The heavy plastic ring wedged between the duck's upper and lower bills was a hard plastic cover like that on jar of wet napkins. A triangular flange on the inner ring was stuck in the back of the duck's neck like an arrow. Its tongue was swollen and twisted under the sharp edge of the plastic in its mouth.

The animal died a tortured death. Each time it would struggle with the plastic that had its lower beak pinned to its throat, the arrow would dig into the back of its neck. Death was surely a relief to this suffering and starving creature.

My wishes

Experiences like this leave impressions – some immediate, some delayed, some cumulative and long-lasting. Besides the obvious one of the need to not discard garbage, especially plastic and those 6-pack yokes, I can still feel the collective powerful strength of human outreach and concern bounded with a sense of helplessness.

I only wish that that concerted reaction could be unleashed by an awareness of the magnificent seabirds that are assaulted by oiling near the Hibernia and other offshore platforms where no appropriate independent vigilance is there to detect this suffering. Hence out of sight, out of mind. Or at Sandy Pond in Long Harbour where the provincial and federal governments have approved the destruction of an entire aquatic ecosystem and the many magnificent animals associated with it. Government condoned environmental destruction creates unnecessary animal suffering and death. They deserve better. We know better.

Birds in the area and around the province

After the first snowfall of December, five flickers and two hairy woodpeckers enjoyed a breakfast of suet with Cathy Smallwood at Oliver's Pond and then a late brunch Carolyn Mayo's at Neary's Pond. On Tolt Road, a flightless crow sans tail is being provisioned by Rex Porter.

Christmas Bird Count

On Boxing Day, Darroch Whitaker and I scooted about Portugal Cove and St. Philips as part of the St. John's annual Christmas Bird count. Some highlights include a strand of about 100 eiders flying past Beachy Cove into the teeth of chilling easterly gale and large flocks of cedar waxwings, American goldfinches and purple finches along Western Gully Road. The biggest surprise was the absence of seabirds in the coves following days of powerful easterly winds. A single black guillemot was the only seabird besides gulls that we found. And as usual, it was invigorating and fun.

Stay vigilant. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 737-7673 (w) and 895-2901 (h).