

THROUGH
ANIMALS' EYES,
AGAIN

Stories of Wildlife Rescue

by

Lynn Marie Cuny

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Preface

The book you are holding in your hands was never really intended to be a book at all. Since 1977 when I founded Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation, Inc., I have been writing the stories you will find in these pages for our Members Newsletter. Every day, as a primary aspect of my work, I am in the rare position to directly or indirectly encounter members of the non-human wild and domestic animal community. These were not always happy encounters. This is to be expected in the case of wild animals in particular, as they understandably have a natural fear and disdain for humans. However, they were, I believe, important encounters and only after literally years of being coaxed to do so, I have completed two books that are a compilation of stories of these meaningful “meetings” with animals.

I believe the most important function of these stories is that they approach the world of non-human animals from a perspective of deep respect and appreciation. You will not find in the pages of this book any tales of how wonderful it is to have a “pet” raccoon or monkey; you will not read about the bond between wild animals and humans. What you will find are true stories of the animal-to-animal bonds, relationships, rescues, and devotion. There are also stories about domesticated animals and what their lives, like that of their wild counterparts, are like in a world dominated by you and me. I have done my best to write what I feel might be taking place in the hearts and minds of the animals I have been fortunate enough to be of service to. I do not believe for a minute that we can ever really know their minds so I can only write what I have perceived through my flawed human screen.

If you have had enough of the animal horror stories, you will enjoy what I have offered in this manuscript. If you have ever struggled with the age-old questions, “do animals have feelings, do they think, share, want, mourn,” you will find these stories enlightening. If you have had the good fortune of spending time as an unobtrusive observer of the other species who inhabit this earth then I think you will find this book most enjoyable. I hope that no matter what your interest in wild and domesticated animals might be, that you are touched by these stories recounting the lives of the animals who have made a profound difference in my life and the lives of all the people

who have been a part of Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation, Inc. for these 30 years. It is my hope that *Through Animals' Eyes, Again* will move its readers to see animals in a new and more realistic light and that with that new vision we will all become more compassionate human beings.





The Lady Hawk

Have you ever been driving or sitting and reading or just going about your daily chores when something you see or smell or hear enlivens the memory of a particularly sweet and meaningful event in your life? This very thing happened to me when my partner, Craig Brestrup, and I were driving into San Antonio. As we drove through the remaining wooded areas along 281 North we passed a giant golf ball towering over the trees advertising a totally out-of-place golf course. I have seen this gaudy edifice countless times but for some reason this time I was reminded of the area that is situated well beyond that turn in the road.

When I was growing up in San Antonio in the 1950s, my parents purchased a small lot in a new “development” called Cypress Cove. I was the youngest of six and had the good fortune to be blessed with parents who were two of the finest people I have ever known. My mother and father loved nature and had a dream to one day, after all of us kids were raised and on our own, build a small house on that lot in Cypress Cove and spend their retirement years in the peace and quiet of the Hill Country. There was little or no peace and quiet for them while they were raising my five siblings and me, and they so loved the outdoors that this seemed a very fitting way to live out the last years of their lives. In preparation for the realization of their dream, they used to take me and a brother or two out to their favored spot so that we could all enjoy a day away from the city. And we kids would go there on our own to swim in the ponds and run off some of our endless energy. Thanks to our parents’ influence we all loved nature and were happiest when we were climbing trees or sitting by a creek. It was not by accident that the Cuny home was the place to go if you lived in our neighborhood and had found a homeless dog or cat or if you encountered an injured or baby opossum, lizard, frog, or on one occasion, a red-tailed hawk.

One day, one of my brothers came home proudly toting a huge cardboard box. My mother always knew this meant there would be

another mouth to feed—not a human mouth, but a mouth just the same. Though I cannot remember the details, I will always remember that inside that box was the most beautiful bird my young eyes had ever seen. The hawk had a badly, though not broken, injured wing and she was thin and almost lifeless. Most of what we did in those days to aid animals in need of help was probably a combination of some knowledge, a lot of guessing, and my mom's prayers along with all of our best intentions. We placed the huge bird in a large cage in our backyard. Though most folks did not have cages in their backyard, there was always a big cage or two at the Cuny home. We immediately set about the task of trying to find something we hoped we could to entice her to eat. I remember that anything as expensive as a steak in those days would rarely make it into our house, but somehow for the hawk my mother managed to scrape together the funds to buy this beauty just what she needed to survive.

My brothers had fashioned a crude cast for her wing, and using a small pair of pliers they had to force the unwelcome food down her throat. Every day there was the ritual of trying to coax her to eat on her own and every day she would refuse. The poor, injured bird was terrified and wanted nothing but to be free again. I will never forget the spring morning that I went out to check on her with my mom and there in the cage sat a single, perfect egg. From that moment on my mom referred to our patient as "Lady Hawk."

Day after day, I would sit by the cage and peer inside at the nervous, disabled bird, as my mother would offer her soothing voice in an attempt to calm the nervous captive. I wondered where she came from and if she had left a family behind. I felt so sorry for her and so helpless to do anything to relieve her suffering. As a young girl, there was a part of me that wanted her to be calm and glad to see me but because my parents had taught us that wild creatures should be respected for who they are, I wished she could fly away. I think my mother felt particularly sad for this foundling. I remember she and my father talking about how unfair it was that someone so beautiful and wild should be crippled and possibly lose her ability to fly. Most of the animals brought to our home or found by one of us children were sturdy young opossums or horned lizards who always survived our care and curiosity. But to see this magnificent creature of the wild grounded and stuck in a cage in our backyard touched us in

ways we had never before felt. My mother would not let a day go by without taking repeated breaks from her daily washing, ironing, and cooking to go out and do her best to reassure the bird she called, "Lady Hawk." I felt certain that some form of trust or even fondness was growing between these two. My mother was one of the most maternal and nurturing women I have ever known, and I believe that gentleness was not lost on the fragile hawk.

Finally after weeks of confinement and care, Lady Hawk was well enough to be set free. We were all a little amazed and thrilled that she had survived. When we talked about the best place for her to reclaim her freedom, there was little to discuss. Mom and Dad knew that she would be safe at Cypress Cove. As I recall, the privilege of releasing her went to my brother who had found her. Though none of us went along, we were given a full report of how, when the box was gently placed on the ground and opened wide to set her free, the bird who had once hovered near death, tilted her head to the sky, opened her bronze colored wings and in one flawless motion lifted her now strong body up into the air. Leaving the box and my brother behind on the leaf-strewn ground, she flew into the dense cover of the live oaks and after a quick survey of her surroundings took to the pure blue sky and flew out of sight. We were all happy that the release was a success, but I think my mom was more pleased than any of us. For months afterwards we talked about the big, beautiful bird who had touched our lives and was now somewhere in the Hill Country flying free. I think we were a little sad to know that we would never see her again.

It was the following autumn when one of my brothers and I went with our parents to spend the day at Cypress Cove. The air was crisp with an early cool front and the four of us walked along the edge of the creek talking as the dried, fallen leaves crunched beneath our feet. We were laughing and glad to be out-of-doors when, in only an instant, the calm of our surroundings was interrupted by the appearance of a large bird flying down the center of the creek. We looked up just as she landed on top of one of the oaks. Our conversations ceased and in that moment of total silence I heard my mother's soothing voice: "Lady Hawk, is that you?" The bronze beauty flew down even closer; now she was perched just above my mother's head. Again my mom's voice reached out to her: "How good to see you,

Lady Hawk.” The now healthy bird tilted her regal head and looked down at my mom. She had heard my mother’s voice as we walked along that day and something compelled her to come closer. The two ladies stood there remembering the time when they had met under very different circumstances. That time had been a sad one indeed, but today all that passed between them was a mutual remembrance, a greeting and an understanding that these two had shared something no one else would understand. The bird my mother called Lady Hawk sat for a few moments more; the two visited and then said their good-byes. As we reluctantly continued our walk, Lady Hawk flew down the center of the creek one last time, and as if to let my mom know that she was indeed well, shot up into the bright blue autumn sky and disappeared from our sight. We never saw her again, but when we would visit Cypress Cove and walk along that creek, we were serenaded by the not too distant call of a red-tailed hawk. My mother would always say, “There is Lady Hawk,” and my father and I would smile and know she was right.





An Unusual Adoption

It is hard to believe that autumn is approaching because the calendar says August, but as I look out on the sanctuary grounds I see the shadows lengthen and each evening the stars appear just a bit sooner than the night before. Oddly enough, we are the happy beneficiaries of an unseasonable cool front, one more element that contributes to the overall autumnal mood of the last month of summer.

It was an August much like this one nine or more years ago when Wildlife Rescue was called to rescue a tiny, orphaned cacomistle. This is the beautiful slate gray and white nocturnal mammal so many folks refer to as a ring-tailed cat. The fact of the matter is they are not in the feline family at all; they are more closely related to their cousin, the ever-popular raccoon. It is this relationship that could help explain exactly why the unusual events unfolded as they did.

The baby cacomistle had lost her mother and her siblings to dogs who discovered the family nesting in the hollow of a huge, ancient hackberry tree. The mother had done her best to distract the curious and ultimately destructive dogs away from her young, but the dogs were persistent, large, and aggressive and the nocturnal family of this delicate species was none of those things. When the bloody site was discovered the following morning there was no one alive except for the, I suspect, “runt of the litter”—a little female who was now in our care. It was ironic because, not only was she small, but this remaining survivor was frail and probably would not have survived the rigors of growing up in the wild. But this is something we will never know—for now her family was dead and she was in our hands. And as is the norm, it was the time of year when our hands were very full.

There were squirrels, nestling doves, cardinals, and finches; there were raccoons and skunks but not one single cacomistle could be found except for this lone little girl. The moment she arrived we knew we had our work cut out for us because she was covered in blood, though her wounds were only scrapes and small cuts. It appeared that her mother had tried to move her. Perhaps it was her dying attempt

to save her baby that had left this young one covered with her mother's blood. She was frightened and cold and wanting only the warmth of her family. We had no family to offer her; all we had were our honest attempts to keep her alive and enable her to grow into a strong juvenile and one day return to the wild.

But there were many events that were yet to occur before we would see the dawning of that day. In order to help her feel more at home and less alone in this foreign world, we placed the tiny female next to a litter of healthy, fat, rarely quiet, orphaned raccoons. They were only slightly larger and considerably more vocal, so much so that at times I wondered if the baby cacomistle would have preferred isolation to these raucous neighbors. But as the weeks passed and all the babies grew, she seemed to look and listen to her nearby relatives for comfort. Cacomistles have the sweetest of calls and when a baby is in distress and you hear this shrill alarm you want only to comfort the little one. But this little girl found better ways to find the emotional comfort she needed. The litter of raccoon babies growing up next door began to listen to their neighbor and when she would cry they would do the same; oddly it seemed to calm the infant cacomistle, though it set off a seemingly unending current of raccoon cries. The lone little girl would become quiet and take one of her regular naps as her neighbors railed on. This ritual repeated itself with reliable regularity until one day the lives of her neighbors were drastically altered.

It is our hope every time we rescue babies who have lost their mother that a surrogate will come our way to help care for and teach the youngsters. This only rarely occurs, but when it does it is the best thing that can happen to orphaned wildlife. One day we were met with the great good fortune (although terribly sad for other reasons) of just such a mother finding her way to our door. She was a young raccoon who had been hit by a car and if that was not bad enough, she had been caring for her own babies when the accident occurred. The people who hit her thought they were doing the right thing by keeping her in a cage in their backyard for two weeks after the accident. When her condition worsened they brought her to Wildlife Rescue. Upon examination it was clear that she had left behind a litter of young and sadly they too had most likely perished by now. The young mother was emaciated and had a badly infected rear leg.

She was also exhausted from trying her best to escape from her captors for two weeks, doing her best no doubt to get back to her babies. But now her babies were gone and she was in yet another frightening captive situation.

After several days of fluid and nutritional therapy, her condition improved. And being the ever-hopeful people that we are, we placed the new female in the same room as the young raccoons. There was no mistaking who this newcomer was in their quick, young minds. There was a mother in their midst and they knew it! The new mom, however, was not quite as enthused as the babies. She peered into their carrier and offered nothing friendlier than a quick, low growl. This immediately quieted the little ones and in no time an understanding was born. It was another week before she would behave in a caring fashion towards her new adoptees, but once she decided to take on the motherless youngsters, it was if they had been her very own from the very beginning. The day we knew they could officially call her “mother” began with an “accident.”

After cleaning the female’s cage, a volunteer failed to secure the latch on the door. In no time the mother raccoon left the confines of her cage and made her way to the large box holding the baby raccoons. She must have made several attempts to get in because the scratch marks on the side of the box were deep and the cardboard was severely shredded. But one attempt or twenty, by the time we came back into the room equipped with the formula for the youngsters and ready with our bottles and plans to feed them, they had already sat down to dinner. There in the bottom of that huge box that had once held a big-screen TV, was the most welcome sight we could hope to see. The once aching, babyless mother had found the litter of youngsters who had lost their own mother and in their own way, with no help from us, except the mistake of an open door, they had created a new family. There were all the sweet sounds of contented babies, sucking and cooing on their mom and her returning the love with her licks and upturned stomach. Our work for these beauties was done. Now all we had to do was to find the perfect safe site and set them free to begin again their life in the wild.

But out of this union came one tragedy. Now there would be no more baby coon sounds for the cacomistle. She still had no mother and now she did not even have the comfort from the sounds of those

noisy neighbors. But nature has ways of taking care of her youngsters and this time would prove to be no exception. It was very late one night, all the babies had been fed, the birds were quietly perched in their areas and no one was stirring. No one except a small gray, furry, little female cacomistle who decided this was the night to go exploring. In all her weeks with us, she had remained safe in her large wire cage. There were limbs and leafy branches, a small dark area where she could hide and soft warm flannel bedding for all those midday naps. But tonight something stirred her spirit, something told her to move those tiny, scarred legs and go exploring for something better than a wire cage. I do not know how long the little girl had been out; there were some boxes of tissues knocked over, and a small bowl of water left out for a mouse was tipped and spilled on the floor. But the sight that I will never forget was the one I saw when I opened the door to the nursery. There in that dim light of late night was the new mother raccoon; she too had decided to squeeze her way free. It seems there was a baby crying and it was her job to look into the matter. And now she had that very baby in her jaws; our eyes met and all I could think of was that the young female cacomistle was soon to lose her life. After all the trauma and all the crying it seemed such a shame that she would end her life this way, killed by a mother of another species not all that different from her own.

I could not move fast enough and neither could the raccoon. She had lost one litter of young at the hands of careless humans, and she was not about to let it happen again. With that slim, gray body of the orphan cousin in her masked jaws, she pushed her way through the opening that had allowed her release and in a moment she was back in her cage. But she did not take this new baby there to kill her; no, this baby too would become one of her own. She lay the frail little female in the middle of her litter and then with her stomach upturned she lay next to her and began licking and encouraging the baby to nurse. The tiny cacomistle needed little encouragement; in only seconds she had taken her place amongst the new family and here she would stay until she was weaned. The mother raccoon loved and cared for her as if she too were her very own. As the weeks passed and the babies grew we moved the unique family to a large outdoor cage and it was in this cage that the little female learned to climb and play with her cousins and was weaned and made ready for the wild. When

we set them free, they went back to the wild as a family; I do not believe they remained so for very long, but the babies, even the different one, will always remember the caring mother who not only took them in but who went searching one night for a baby in distress and brought back a cousin they could all call their own.

