



Wildlife Rehabilitation and Relocation

Dedicated to limiting the further loss of Arizona's native birds of prey

31840 North 45th Street
Cave Creek, AZ 85331

480-595-5047

By Bill LeRoy

Prologue: In Navajo oral history it is believed that in the Third World a flying dinosaur bird was born near Shiprock, Arizona. The mother and father of Great Bird were killed by the Monster Slayer. It was learned that Great Bird had two children who were brought down to the ground. One baby bird was made into an eagle, and the other baby bird into an owl.

I am called NE-AHS-JAH, a Great Horned Owl, named Logan by the healers. This is the story of my transformation.

THE INJURY

I had been hunting all night with my mate in the old hunting grounds near the laughing waters (known as Verde River by the humans). It had been a good night and we sang joyfully in the early twilight hours as earth mother shook off the darkness. I had stopped on a tall Saguaro to clean my talons. I had almost finished when I noticed my mate's eyes widen in warning. She tried to warn me of the coming explosion, but she was too late. My head exploded in pain as the iron pellets slammed into the side of my face. My left side went completely numb as I was thrown violently against the Saguaro and then to the ground. I was now blind in my left eye and my right was imbedded with cactus spines. As I lay there paralyzed; I watched the remnants of my face feathers float away as if in a dream. Through the pain and the haze I could hear several young humans riding away on their metal horses. They were laughing.

I do not know how, but I managed to right myself and perch upon a large stone not far from the river. I could hear the water, but I was powerless to move towards it. It was then that I realized I was dying. As the sun rose higher and the darkness of death approached, I envisioned my mates beautiful face framed by a darkening sky. I would miss her deeply. There came a jolt and in a moment I was wrapped within a soft covering and lifted upwards in a strong gentle embrace. Overwhelmed by pain I did not resist, yet my talons clenched and unclenched at this unseen danger. As I was carried along I heard nothing but a soft soothing voice.

THE HOSPITAL

After many hours the movement stopped and I was placed upon a smooth cool surface. The covering was removed and I found myself in the arms of a female human who I would later come to know as Sam. Sam held me as another human whom she called Bob quickly and gently cleaned my wounds. I felt a pin prick and fought to free myself as the soothing fluids entered my body. A warm covering was placed over me again and I was placed gently into a quiet dark place. Overcome by pain and exhaustion, I slowly drifted away into a deep sleep.

I awoke late that evening, my eyes where swollen shut. I sensed I was in an enclosed area with many other birds. I could not see the others but I could hear them. This room was full of the injured and wounded. I wondered at this because I was not afraid. All of my senses screamed at me to escape, yet there was a spirit in this place, a spirit of great healing and tenderness. It had a calming effect upon me and I yielded once again to the overwhelming desire to rest. I slept, and I dreamed.

"Good morning", she said! I awoke with a start, and clacked my beak in fear and anger. The female human called Sam was staring at me. She was smiling and cooing softly in my comfort language. How could this be, I wondered? She opened the door to my kennel and reached in. I was powerless to resist. Despite my fears I felt somehow that this was

right and that I should allow her to take me. She lifted me up and out, and placed me on the table. "You are a mess", she said, "but we will see that you are made healthy and beautiful again". She gently examined me. There was another pin prick followed by that same soothing sensation. Another quick look and I was placed back in my kennel. The door was closed and I found myself alone in the safety of darkness once again.

The next morning something different happened. Instead of the examination, I was picked up and gently placed into a somewhat larger kennel. The human called Bob was back. He lifted up the kennel with me inside and I was carried out into the daylight. My kennel was placed inside a metal horse. I felt a vibration and the metal horse began to move. We traveled for what felt like a long time and then we stopped. Once again my kennel was lifted up and carried into another room. This room was very bright and the light hurt my damaged eyes. Another human approached my kennel and slowly reached inside. He possessed the same gentle spirit so I decided to allow him to touch me. His hands moved over me with great care and gentleness. He then spoke to Bob and I was carried into a much smaller room. This room was very bright as well. I was held gently and I felt the now familiar pin prick yet once again. I was calm as I drifted away into darkness.

I awoke in my kennel. I was back in the first enclosed area surrounded by the other injured birds. In the weeks that followed the routine was mostly the same each day. I was removed from my kennel each morning, examined by Sam. My swollen and damaged eyes were gently treated, and I was placed back into my kennel to rest. Each afternoon I was offered a meal of fresh prey meat which I accepted with great enthusiasm. (I had been instructed by my mother to never refuse an opportune meal). Throughout this period of time, I observed that my contact with Sam was carefully controlled. I was never handled for more than a few minutes, and I was always handled by the same individuals. While I did not understand this then, I do now. I was being allowed to remain wild.

THE AVIARY

It was now many weeks since my injury and my vision was slowly returning. I was getting stronger with each passing night. I was also getting restless. I missed the freedom of flight and the company of my mate. As I slept that afternoon, I dreamt I was hunting. My wings were full of the cool night air, and I coursed silently through the darkness.

The next day had begun like all the others. I was removed from my kennel and gently examined. To my shock and surprise, when Sam finished her examination I was picked up by Bob, flipped over onto my backside and held motionless. Indignant, I struggled to break away. He held me firmly in his hands and Sam quickly placed a small colorful band around my left leg. The band did not hurt, its presence was unnoticeable, and the color was amusing so I tolerated it. When Sam was finished, I was placed into a smaller kennel and then carried outside into the daylight.

I trembled as I was carried along. The day was full of dangers to my kind and I was frightened. Once again, I could hear the familiar sounds of the desert. I longed for the darkness and the freedom of flight. We stopped and moved inside what looked to be a large enclosure. It was occupied by one others of my kind, one was much older than I and strangely calm under the circumstances. Bob opened the kennel and took me out. He gently placed me down and stepped outside. The door was closed and the others and I were left alone.

Looking up, I could see well enough to notice several tree branches above my head. I flexed my wings and rotated them, extending my feathers. I felt strong and everything seemed to work so I pushed off and attempted to fly to the lowest branch. I made it. It felt good to fly and I began to wonder if this was somehow all part of a plan. Before I could finish that thought the older one flew over and stopped next to me. She examined me carefully and her eyes filled with compassion. "You were severely injured", she said, "but your wounds are healing nicely. It will not be long before you are released".

My mind reeled, released I thought, released!? Months ago I had resigned myself to accept that my future would be spent inside an enclosure created by man. The despair had become dulled by the daily routine of examinations, feeding, and gentle care. Now in a moment, my heart was filled with hope. I would be released. I would be free to fly, free to hunt and free to find my mate. "How can this be", I asked. The old one answered, "These Humans are not like the others that hunt and kill us. They are healers. They understand the circle of life and are part of it". I accepted her words in silence. These humans did seem to understand. Sam and Bob and the first ones who found me were very different from the others. I would think on this.

Strengthened by the hope of my release, I spent the remainder of the afternoon flexing my wings and flying from perch to perch. As the sun began to fade, I noticed Bob approaching the enclosure. A small door opened and fresh prey meat was placed on a small ledge next to a perch. The door was quickly closed and Bob stood by apparently watching to see what we would do next. The old one immediately flew to the prey meat and began to eat. Seeing no danger, I followed. The meat was good and I was reminded of the old days when I was free. The old one and I ate together and as the darkness approached we settled in to watch the familiar creatures of the night. The moon was full that evening and I sensed that eventually I would be set free. To this day I do not know how I knew this. As I look back I can only say that the realization

was a result of the entire process of my healing. I see now that everything that was done to me was done in a manner that prepared me for my freedom.

It was now a long time since my injuries, and I had settled as best I could into my new surroundings. I learned that my new friend and mentor (called Scheherazade by the healers) had been severely injured as well. She had been shot by a human in her right wing. Her injury was so severe that part of her wing had been removed. She told me this was done to save her life. I wondered at her words. How could she remain true to herself and her wildness in her condition? How could she ever be happy? How could she express herself apart from the beauty of flight?

Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly realized that she was talking to me. I focused my gaze upon her face and listened. She was speaking very slowly; her words were steady and measured. She was telling me her story. She told me about her family, and her youth. She told me about how she came to this place; about the evening she was shot by the human. She told me how she had lain wounded and bleeding all night praying for death, and how she was saved by the healers. She told me of her despair and how she came to find meaning in her new life. She told me how she had mothered many lost hatchlings, and provided comfort and support to others like me. I finally understood; Scheherazade was also a healer, and I was just one of many who would pass through this place needing her care and instruction. It was then that I saw her true beauty, and realized exactly how fortunate I was to be here.

MY RELEASE

My last day with the healers began as all the others. By human calculations it had been almost five seasons since my injury. Scheherazade and I had been up all night watching the endless night time activity. We talked of our families and loved ones, and as the morning approached we had settled in to sleep away the daylight. My vision had been restored and I was able to catch and kill my own prey. I was ready to be released. Late that afternoon, Bob approached as usual, but this time he came into the enclosure carrying a small kennel. I glanced over at Scheherazade for reassurance, and I saw the answer in her eyes. Today was my day. I was going to be set free.

I was overcome with emotion as Bob placed me gently into the kennel. I was carried into the room called the hospital and greeted by Sam. Sam was dressed differently and she was very excited and full of joy. "Today is your day", she said as she examined me. "Today is the day of your release". After the examination I was offered some fresh meat. I was too excited to eat, and I spent the remaining time watching Bob and Sam hurry about making preparations.

Finally, Bob came over and picked up my kennel and carried me outside. My kennel was placed on the ground next to a large iron horse. Bob moved his hand, an opening appeared and my kennel was placed inside. In a moment we were off. Some time later, we stopped. The opening reappeared and Bob reached in and lifted my kennel out into the late afternoon light.

Bob and Sam were greeted by several other humans who seemed very happy to see them. Bob picked up my kennel and we all began to move away together. I was being carried down a hill towards a large open area. There were hundreds of humans in this place. It was a little frightening to be surrounded by so many of them. We continued to move along and we finally stopped in front of a raised area. Bob placed my kennel on the ground next to Sam and sat down next to her. Many humans came over to greet Bob and Sam. Most of these humans also spoke to me. While I did not understand their words, their intentions were clear. They were happy for me and appeared to be celebrating my release. I was overwhelmed by the strange events that had brought me to this moment. I had been rescued from certain death and introduced into a world I could have never imagined. This new world contained humans who understood that all living things have a place in the circle of life. This was strange indeed.

As darkness approached the crowd of humans became very quiet. I sensed that something was about to happen and I began to tremble slightly with anticipation. Bob stood up. "Here we go, it's time" he said to me. He reached down and picked up my kennel and carried me up onto the raised area. He sat the kennel down and opened the door. He reached in and removed me. I was lifted up and placed on his arm. He held my legs gently but firmly.

I was now facing the largest gathering of humans I had ever seen. Before I could gather my thoughts, Bob began to speak. Although I could not understand his words, I knew what he was saying. He was telling my story. He talked of my injury, and how I was rescued by humans called volunteers. He talked about my rehabilitation and my struggle to return to health. He spoke about his love for those of my kind and all wild animals. He encouraged everyone present to support those humans who work to save and rehabilitate injured wildlife.

Bob stopped talking and looked at me. He then removed the small bindings that held my legs to his arm. He gave me a long loving look and whispered a soft goodbye. He then handed me to another human who had been selected to release me. He lifted me high into the air and set me free.

I WAS FREE! As I flew, my body rocked with emotion. It was as if every part of me was reaching out to embrace the evening sky. I was filled with joy and abandonment. I flew straight out over the gathering of humans. I said a silent goodbye to Sam and Bob who watched me as I flew. As I climbed higher I heard the two humans that rescued me call my new name. The female's eyes were wet with joy. Her voice was the last human voice I heard as I climbed higher and higher into the darkening sky. It was the same gentle voice I had heard that very first day. I would never forget it.