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Flying free: Pelican released after rehab

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An American white pelican that was nursed back to health at the World Bird Sanctuary in Eureka after being found weakened by starvation and with an injured foot takes flight Friday to join hundreds of his fellow pelicans at the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary in West Alton. The hunter who found the injured bird two months ago on Dresser Island in the Mississippi River says the bird followed him back to his car and jumped inside as he was leaving.



WEST ALTON – A hunter's act of kindness toward an injured animal came full circle Friday morning as wildlife rehabilitators released an American white pelican back into nature.

Mike Haefner, 45, of O'Fallon, Mo., looked on proudly as experts from the World Bird Sanctuary in Eureka opened the door of a doggie crate along the bank of Ellis Bay in the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary at West Alton. As photographers and television cameramen captured the scene, the pelican emerged from the crate, took a few ungainly steps then stopped to look around.

"How ya doin' Pelly?" Haefner called as the large white bird stretched its black-tipped wings out several times. "Remember me?"

In fact, it was two months to the day since Haefner came across the bird while bow-hunting with a friend on Dresser Island, in the Mississippi

River roughly between the Godfrey bluffs and St. Charles County on the Missouri side. Haefner noticed the bird had a foot injury and appeared weak.

"I told my buddy, 'If that bird is still there on the way back, I'm taking him home. I ain't leaving him here for coyote bait,'" Haefner said.

Sure enough, when the hunters returned to their car, Haefner said the pelican followed him.

"I opened the back seat of the car, and he jumped in. I said, 'Oh, no you don't.' I put him in the trunk."

Once Haefner got the pelican home, he said it quickly made friends with his chocolate Labrador retriever.

"My Lab was playing ball with him," he said. "The dog would roll the ball to him, and he would roll it back. It was like he was somebody's pet."

Haefner's 13-year-old daughter, Jessica, also bonded with the big bird.

"He started chasing me and playing tag," she said. "When he would touch me, he would run the other way. He was so cute."

The next day, Haefner took the injured bird to the World Bird Sanctuary, which mostly cares for and rehabilitates injured and sick raptors, or birds of prey.

"We haven't released too many pelicans," said Roger Holloway, director of interpretive services and facilities at the sanctuary. He said the center takes in just a few aquatic birds, such as pelicans or great blue herons, each year.

The sanctuary's founder and executive director, Walter Crawford Jr., said personnel there named the pelican "Bill" in memory of a sponsor's deceased brother-in-law. The name also plays off the bird's most distinctive feature: its long, yellow bill with the large distensible pouch on the lower mandible.

Crawford said the pelican was thin and weak and needed antibiotics to

help get rid of a possible infection. It also was given fluids to rehydrate its body. Within a day, the bird regained its appetite, eventually eating as many as 20 fish a day and gaining 3 pounds in the first 10 days of its recovery.

This week, Crawford and his co-workers decided Bill had recovered sufficiently to be released into the wild. They chose Riverlands for the release because it is a favored stopover point for migrating white pelicans. About 300 of the big birds were present Friday, swimming on Ellis Bay or flying in slow circles above the river.

White pelicans are distributed throughout most of western North America and the Midwest, especially during migration, Crawford said. They breed on inland lakes in the United States and Canada. Unlike their coastal cousin, the brown pelican, which makes acrobatic dives to catch fish well below the surface of the ocean, white pelicans feed by paddling on the water's surface in groups and catching fish in shallow water.

White pelicans are among the largest North American birds, with a wingspan up to 9 feet; adults weigh 12 to 18 pounds.

Bill the pelican eyed some of his fellows on the river, then stretched his bill out in an exaggerated yawn. His first tentative flight was about 25 feet long, landing near the water as the photographers clicked away.

Then came the moment the observers had been waiting for. The rehabbed pelican took off and flew over the river for several hundred yards, then banked gracefully and splashed down near some of his new friends. Everybody on the shore applauded.

Joe Hoffmann, the rehab coordinator at the World Bird Sanctuary, said it was gratifying to see the pelican fly so well. The sanctuary's flight cage is only 100 feet long, barely enough space for the big bird to get up enough steam to become airborne.

"We had to really exercise him a lot on a heavy nylon string," Hoffmann said. "It's hard to assess a pelican's ability to fly before release."

Hoffman said he had expected the pelican to fly only a short distance to reach the water, then to swim away from the shore.

"But when he banked and flew like that, he looked great," he said.

Haefner said it pleased him that the bird had recovered well enough to be released.

"He looked like a totally different bird from the first time I saw him," Haefner said. "He looked healthy. I'm tickled to death."

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