

# Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, Inc.: An Injured Bird's BFF

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOSEPHINE ECCCEL

**W**ILD BIRDS FACE LIFE-threatening hazards every day. Some are natural, like harsh weather or predators. But the greatest danger, says Lisa Smith of Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research is, "people – definitely people." It's estimated that up to a billion birds



String and yarn that someone threw away was woven into this eastern kingbird's nest. It looks cozy, but baby birds' feet can get dangerously tangled in the fibers.

die each year in North America from colliding with windows. Cats may be responsible for the deaths of another half billion. Others are electrocuted by high tension wires, hit by cars, or poisoned inadvertently by toxins we use to control pests. Raptors ingest lead shot and plastics, and waterfowl get tangled in fishing line. Encroaching development and related activities degrade their habitat and food sources, and our city lights interfere with their migratory navigation systems.

Today there are efforts to lessen the dangers people create. DNREC, for example, has partnered with concerned groups to promote a campaign to deter birds from glass windows and doors. The agency also supports the Wilmington Lights Out! program, which aims



Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, based in Newark, treats up to 3,000 birds each year, like this American robin from Milford.

DENNIS MURPHY



An orchard oriole (left) and a cowbird are making progress together. In the wild, these young might have been rivals in the same nest. Cowbirds lay their eggs in songbirds' nests and force the adoptive parents to hatch and raise them to the detriment of their own smaller chicks.

to minimize nighttime illumination of high-rise buildings during migration seasons. DNREC's Division of Parks and Recreation's parks have receptacles for discarded fishing line located near popular fishing spots. And annual cleanup days reduce the glut of plastics and other throwaways in coastal recreation areas.

### The BFF of Delaware Birds

Yet, if wild birds do get injured, sick, poisoned or orphaned, there is still hope. Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, a regional, non-profit rehabilitation center based in Newark, treats up to 3,000 birds each year, from tiny hummingbirds to mighty raptors. About 130 different native species are treated annually. By mid-summer there may be as many as 300 birds being cared for at an average cost of between \$50 and \$1,000 each, Smith says.

Since 1989, Tri-State's headquarters has been the Frink Center for Wildlife, a renovated bank barn dating from the 1930s. It sits on land that was part of a working farm for nearly 200 years. The site is leased from New Castle County, which purchased the farm in 1980 and incorporated it into the Middle Run Valley Natural Area, a popular destination for hikers, bikers and birders.

### Getting well

The wild bird clinic is open every day. Treatment for sick or injured birds is pre-

scribed by a staff veterinarian. It might involve setting a broken bone, suturing a wound, administering medicine for parasites or viruses, or chelation therapy for lead poisoning.

Most of the routine caregiving is handled by some 200 volunteers. Feeding is a big part of the job. "We do a lot of research to make sure we are putting the right items in front of [the birds]," Smith says. "Food items that are similar to what they would find in the wild."

Songbird chicks are hand fed as often as every 20 minutes. As they mature, the interval between feedings lengthens. Their initial diet is moistened dry kitten food to which vitamins, minerals and other supplements are added.

Birds of prey get dead rats and mice, farm-raised game birds or venison, whatever is appropriate for the species—and cut

into proper-size morsels. Fish, sometimes donated by local fishermen, is on the menu for eagles and ospreys. Tri-State's refrigerators also hold blood worms, brine shrimp, and insects for shorebirds. "[The food] has to be presented correctly, too," says Smith, "in a dish of the appropriate size and shape [or] draped across a log." Owls, nocturnal hunters, are fed as late in the day as possible.

If a bird is close to starvation or immobilized, it may need to be nourished through a tube inserted down its throat. A starved bird will first get clear fluids, then progressively more complex liquids until it is able to return to a normal diet.

What may seem like drudgery has its rewards. "Where else would I get to hold a pelican?" asks Betty Sharon, a retired teacher who volunteers at Tri-State. She also transports birds to and from the



This lucky wood thrush, less than a week old, was found in a yard and brought to Tri-State. It needs warmth and food every 20 minutes, but its chance of survival is better than in the wild.



The wood thrush, less than two weeks old, but with eyes open and covered with feathers, still requires warmth and food from its human caregivers.



Nearly three weeks old, the wood thrush is in an indoor enclosure where it has room to move about and develop its muscles. It can't yet fly or feed itself.



Now a month old, the wood thrush and this young robin have graduated to an outdoor aviary, where they can practice flying in preparation for release. Soon the hatch will be opened and they will be free to go.

## Things You Can Do To Protect Wild Birds

A great blue heron looking for a meal eyes a plastic fishing float. Ingesting fishing tackle or other plastic objects can be fatal for wildlife.



- Keep pets under control and keep cats indoors.
- Apply decals of bird silhouettes to glass doors and windows to help birds avoid collisions.
- Check for nests before trimming bushes or cutting down trees. Prune in winter, before nesting season begins.
- Watch for wildlife while driving. Birds can't always move quickly enough to get out of the way of cars, especially bigger birds and scavengers that are attracted by roadkill.
- Use natural or organic alternatives to toxic chemicals on lawns and gardens.
- Pick up litter, especially fishing line and plastic six-pack rings.

clinic. "It's wonderful to see when they get back to where they belong," she says.

### Back to the Wild

Smith agrees. She first joined Tri-State as a high school volunteer, continued to work in various capacities for the center and left a private sector job two years ago to become executive director of the facility. "You really do get to know birds at an entirely different level, because each species has its own distinct personality and interesting behaviors you might not notice in the wild. You get to know the baby calls really well. They're all different."

Overall, about 45 percent of the birds Tri-State treats are released. The survival rate for baby birds is much higher than



Feeding stations near Tri-State's outdoor aviaries make it easier for rehabilitated songbirds to transition from being cage fed to foraging for themselves.

that. In the wild, a mere 20 percent of chicks make it to the following spring. Tri-State's figures are lower for adult birds, even with the best of care, since their condition is usually more critical by the time they are brought to the clinic. "A bird will work as hard as it can to stay away from us. It doesn't know we have good intentions," Smith explains. "It has to be pretty severely injured or quite sick before it will allow itself to be captured."

Some baby birds, like raptors and certain waterfowl, are returned to the wild as soon as possible, either with their parents or with an adoptive family or flock, so they can learn valuable hunting and social skills. Human contact is kept to a minimum, including, in some instances, having caregivers don masks and leather gloves when giving food.

Such tactics underscore Tri-State's overarching goal of ensuring their patients' return to their natural habitat healthy and able to fend for themselves.

In the center's outdoor aviaries and flight cages, recovering birds have room to strengthen their wings in preparation for release. When songbirds are ready, a hatch is opened during the day for several days; they are free to come and go. Eventually, the birds do not return. Raptors and waterbirds are taken to a spot near

where they were found or to a similar habitat.

### Tri-State's worldwide renown

Tri-State was established in 1976 following a crude oil spill in the Delaware River. Despite wildlife rescuers' efforts, most of the affected animals died, including many ruddy ducks wintering in the river.

As a result, Lynne Frink, the founder of the Delaware Audubon Society and a longtime wildlife advocate, recognized the critical need to develop better disaster treatment protocols. She founded Tri-State and served as president until her death in 1998. The Frink Center is named after her.

Today, Tri-State is known worldwide for its expertise in treating oiled wildlife. It is one of only three groups in the United States that can "mount a full-scale oil spill response to a large incident," according to Smith. Its team has been called to 135 spills in nine countries and 21 states.

"They have it down to a science," says Sandy Woltman, a former wildlife rehabilitator and current president of the



Audrey Russin, seasonal clinic supervisor, examines a fecal sample from a migratory semi-palmated sandpiper found in the Chesapeake Bay area, one of a group of birds Tri-State treated for botulism last summer.

National Wildlife Rehabilitation Association (NWRA). "They are a leader in wildlife rehabilitation."

Tri-State was the chief organizer for wildlife recovery following BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion off the coast of Louisiana in 2010. Within 24 hours of the call from BP, Tri-State had



Tri-State volunteers release a young rehabilitated bald eagle at a popular eagle wintering location in September. Fall is when adult eagles are no longer defending their nesting sites, making it the best time to reintroduce this youngster to its natural habitat.

four centers from Louisiana to Florida ready to receive animals. The Delaware team of four oil programs staff was joined by its core of trained volunteers who come on board as temporary staff during a crisis, and together they worked with local volunteers to collect, treat and wash more than 2,000 oiled birds.

Feathers saturated with oil provide no insulation, so birds become either overheated or chilled. But getting rid of the oil is never a first priority. “That’s actually the fastest way to kill the bird,” Smith says. Since washing is stressful for birds, their condition needs to first be stabilized. The victims of the gulf spill were hyperthermal, dehydrated and emaciated.

Washing takes 20-30 minutes in successive tubs of 104-degree water mixed with diminishing concentrations of Dawn dishwashing liquid, followed by rinsing for another 20-30 minutes. It’s hot for workers wearing full-length Tyvek suits, rubber gloves and boots to protect their skin from the oil, and it is physically demanding and requires training and certification.

Every five years, Tri-State has a variety of wetting and cleaning agents independently tested to ensure the one used to wash birds is the most effective. It’s one of the ways the center tries to



#### **If You Find a Bird in Need**

Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, Inc., 110 Possum Hollow Road, Newark, DE 19711, provides guidance to anyone who has found a bird in distress. **Call 302-737-9543 or visit the website: [www.tristatebird.org](http://www.tristatebird.org).** The wild bird clinic is open every day to accept injured or abandoned native birds. Do not try to handle raptors or other large birds.

#### **Volunteer to Help**

Tri-State welcomes volunteers. The next general training sessions will be in March and April. Oil spill wildlife response training is offered once a year, usually in the fall. Call or visit the website or Facebook page for specifics.

continually improve the odds of survival for distressed birds. NWRA’s Woltman calls Tri-State “the go-to people” for solutions. As another example, she cites the

work Frink and a Tri-State colleague did to develop a method of removing highly tactile substances like the bird repellent Tanglefoot from feathers. Through banding and long-term monitoring of some of the birds it treats, Tri-State continues to lay the foundation for future improvements.

Tri-State’s mission is clear to anyone who walks through the door of the Frink Center, for on the wall above the windows where some of the smallest patients can be seen nestled in their warm incubators, are the words of founder Lynne Frink: “Seeing a bird lift from my hand and fly free again is the greatest gift I know.” OD

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