

Rescuing Wildlife Is Futile, and Necessary

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Photo



Judith Wakelam, who rehabilitates and releases swifts, holding one of the birds. Credit Anna Huix for The New York Times

On Nature

By HELEN MACDONALD

In a plastic dishpan on Judith Wakelam's kitchen table, six huge, dark eyes gaze up at me from a huddle of pale-fringed faces and dusty black feathers, bladelike wings projecting outward at a variety of unlikely angles. These are baby common swifts, insectivorous birds so exquisitely aerial that they eat, sleep and mate on the wing and spend the first two or three years of their lives migrating between Europe and Africa in continuous flight.

Airborne swifts are renowned for their speed and grace, but the birds in front of me resemble a cross between subway mice and a pile of unexpectedly animate kindling. Their clawed feet are so tiny that they cannot walk, only shuffle, and their wings so long that they cannot take off from flat surfaces; should youngsters crash-land on the ground after leaving the nest, they're as doomed as fish out of water.

Wakelam, a gentle and deliberate woman with silver hair cut in a practical bob, lifts one nestling up and sets it upon a tissue-covered towel. Plucking a defrosted black cricket out of a bowl, she touches it to the tip of a tiny beak, which opens into a pink maw that swallows the tip of her finger. The cricket disappears down the bird's throat. Another follows. Wakelam frowns with concentration but feeds the bird with a calm assurance gained from long experience. Back in 2002, she spotted what she thought was a pile of feathers by the curbside while walking her dog. It was a swift chick. She brought it home. Numerous experts told her that as it would be too difficult to raise, it would die. "And of course it didn't," she said. "It survived. But it was a steep learning curve."

She's now so well known for her skill with common swifts that they are brought to her from all over eastern England. Some come from vets, others from members of the public who have found birds that have fallen from nests and discovered her name on the Internet. This year, she has had nearly 30 in her care, raised on a diet of crickets and wax-moth caterpillars dusted with powdered vitamins. While some don't make it — usually from being given unsuitable food by their initial rescuers — each one that she returns to the wild is a triumph over death. And the chance to observe that triumph is why I'm sitting in this small bungalow in a village near Royal Air Force Mildenhall, the military base in Suffolk where Wakelam used to work in communications and public affairs: If the wind drops later this morning, we'll set some of her young birds free. "It can be very tiring," she says. "The early mornings. But when you let one go, it's just sheer magic. And sometimes I'm in the garden in the evening, and I might see 20, 30, 40 swifts in the air, and I think, I know they're not, but they could be all mine."

We increasingly think that wild animals live in a world separate from our own, and that we are supposed to leave them there. We are happy to watch them and sometimes to feed them. But we physically interact with them only when they're hunted, studied or in serious trouble. And the latter is usually our fault: We dislodge nests, soak seabirds in oil, hit deer and foxes with cars, pick up casualties from beneath glass windows and power lines. When I was 12, I reared a brood of baby bullfinches brought to me by a neighbor who had felled their nest tree. When the birds flew free, I felt I'd righted a wrong that thoughtlessness had perpetrated on the world. Against a backdrop of

environmental destruction and species decline, anxieties about our impact on the natural world become tied to the tragedies suffered by individual animals. Just a few weeks ago, the news that an American hunter had illegally killed a lion called Cecil in Zimbabwe caused outrage across the world: It's an apt illustration of how people care more about the fortunes of a single animal than those of its species. (It's not as if people are furiously protesting the decline of large carnivores every day.) Tending animals until they are fit to be returned to the wild feels like an act of resistance, redress, even redemption. Rearing a single nest of finches in the 1980s didn't halt the decline of bird populations. But my simple sense of the justice of saving them taught me simple, concrete things about finches I'd never otherwise have learned: how they slept, how they communicated, their idiosyncrasies.

“We feel responsible,” says Norma Bishop, executive director of Lindsay Wildlife Experience in Walnut Creek, Calif., which operates America's oldest wildlife rehabilitation center, founded in 1970. “It's a little like the story of Noah rescuing the animals.” Rehabbers stress that their animals are never pets, and their role is to return them to the wild as fast as possible, but they inevitably forge emotional bonds with their charges. British regulations permit individuals to tend to animal casualties themselves, provided they adhere to established welfare guidelines. In America, wildlife rehabilitation is confined to licensed experts, often working for charitable institutions. Whatever a person's position, the dedication involved is immense: Keepers of orphaned elephants in Kenya, for example, must sleep next to the animals every night, taking turns with others because too great an

attachment to any one keeper risks the baby elephant being overcome by grief when he or she takes the night off.

Why do people rescue wildlife? The eminent veterinarian John Cooper told me he thinks “there’s something inside humans when they’re faced with a helpless creature. We have an imperative. A duty.” Bishop agrees: “I believe most people, especially children, simply cannot see an animal suffer.” The Lindsay rehab center receives everything from bobcats to snakes, ducklings to songbirds, brought in by concerned members of the public who have driven many miles to deliver them. Terry Masear, a hummingbird rehabber in Los Angeles, writes that rescuing animals draws out “raw emotions that unleash our deepest insecurities about our humanity, mortality and place in the natural world.” These insecurities can drive mistaken attempts at rescue: Most “lost” fledgling birds in trees or sleeping fawns in long grass should be left well alone, for they are still being fed by their parents.



Wakelam feeding a swift. Credit Anna Huix for The New York Times

Rehabbers have been criticized for being too sentimental, their activities dismissed as acts of compassion for individual animals with little or no conservation benefit. It's a reasonable view, but it misses the point. It's hard to feel a meaningful connection with creatures that are distant silhouettes in summer skies; staring into the eyes of a swift from a few inches away turns it into something much easier to love. The way that rehabbers talk about what they do evokes in me precisely the feelings I've had about rescue animals in my own life: an intoxicating process of coming to

know something quite unlike you, to understand it well enough not only to keep it alive but also to put it back, like a puzzle piece, into the gap in the world it left behind.

Wakelam has no truck with accusations of sentimentality when it comes to swifts, whose numbers in Britain have fallen by more than 35 percent over the last 20 years: Each swift may truly be precious to the species' fortunes. People are increasingly blocking up holes in the eaves of old buildings where swifts traditionally nest, and modern buildings often have nowhere for swifts to nest at all. A similar problem faces chimney swifts in North America as defunct and crumbling chimneys are removed. Many people do not know about the swifts' reliance on our buildings because they simply do not know that they are there. Seeing a rescued swift can change all that.

“Once people have seen a swift in the hand, they are in awe of them,” Wakelam says. Her kitchen is full of cards from well-wishers and people who have brought her swifts, and rescuers drop by to see how their chicks are faring. Some of them are motivated, like Wakelam, to fit swift nest boxes under their roofs.

The wind has dropped, and the sky above the house is a widening pool of blue. Wakelam puts seven swifts into a paper-towel-lined pet carrier, and we drive to her favorite release site, the village cricket field. A match is beginning. After brief, good-natured negotiations, the cricketers stop their game and watch as Wakelam takes a swift from the box, plants a quick good-luck kiss on its feathery crown and holds it high in the air on her outstretched

palm. It looks like a weird, unearthly creature, a delicate construction of scalloped feathers and ungainly wings: hunched into itself, its miniature claws gripping her fingers, it has deep eyes that look like reflective astronaut visors. I wonder what it can see: lines of magnetic force, perhaps, rising air and flying insects and the suspicion of summer storms. The flat green beneath it has nothing to do with it at all.

It stares into the wind. Then it starts shivering. Nothing has visibly changed, but something is happening. On Wakelam's open palm a creature whose home has been paper towels and plastic boxes is turning into a different creature whose home is thousands of miles of air. It is as extraordinary a thing to witness as a dragonfly larva's crawling out of the water and tearing itself out into a thing with wings. Then the swift decides. It hunches itself forward on its wings and drops from her flattened palm. "Up! Up! Up!" calls Wakelam. I'm terrified it will hit the ground. But it does not. For five or six seconds it flies with halting, unaccustomed wing beats a foot above the grass, then hitches and pulls into gear and starts to ascend, flickering upward until it becomes a remote pair of winnowing wings among all the other swifts up there. For weeks it has sat in a plastic box preening and snuggling with its foster siblings. Now it is gone, and Wakelam's hand is its final memory of earth, the last thing it will touch for two years.

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