



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

**The sky is falling
— again!**

Over the last few years a very interesting bird phenomenon has been taking place throughout Sisters Country: waterbirds falling out of the sky in mid-winter.

Western and eared grebes, cute-as-a-bug's-ear ruddy ducks, as well as some coots and a large and very vocal common loon have invaded our air space and litter the ground.

Elise Wolf, a local rehabber, ends up caring for these unfortunate victims of winter. She says it is not only OK to pick up these storm-strays but vital to do so for their health and welfare.

BUT (and a very big BUT!) do so very carefully. The western grebe is quite capable of spearing you with that three-inch, very sharp bill, and the loon, with its even-longer and bigger bill, can do serious damage to your body.

Drape or throw a big towel over the bird, and if one doesn't do it, use another to get the wings and bill covered and the bird immobilized.

Then place it in a box with a thick towel in the bottom and call Elise Wolf at 541-728-8208 or contact her through www.nativebirdcare.org.

I've never had the occasion to deactivate a loon with a towel, but I have used large bath towels to capture grounded and injured eagles. Back in the mid-'70s I received a phone call that started out this way: "If you promise not to call the cops, I'll let you have this giant golden eagle I have in my garage."

I asked the caller how he came to have a golden eagle in his garage, and his reply hit me like a cowboy gettin' bucked off in a rodeo: "I'm a bobcat trapper and I caught the eagle in my trap set. I couldn't shoot it and bury it like the other guys do. It's so big and beautiful, so I just brought it home."

I used two big bath towels to safely get my hands around the eagle without either of us getting damaged. The caller was right on: it turned out to be a big, beautiful adult and healthy female, but with a mangled foot and talons.

I took her to the local vet who amputated her foot, placed a special bandage and cast over the stub and said, "Well, that's all I can do for her, Jim. If infection doesn't set in that cast will eventually fall off and if she knows how to get along on one foot she'll live."

So, I banded her with a USGS No. 9 eagle band and let her go back to the wild. Eight years later the banding lab informed me the eagle

had been found dead under a power pole in Northern California, where she'd been shot.

Those waterbirds that fell out of the sky recently are now being cared for at the Wolf's home. Because of their specialized biology, not one of the Wolf's patients can handle the hard surface on the stiff bottom of a holding pen for very long. They are waterbirds, and as Elise says, "Waterbirds need water to survive!"

The holding pens in which she keeps the waterbirds must have a padded bottom to keep the bird's keels from damage. Towels and more towels come into play with a netted bottom so the grebes — who can't walk very well on land — can settle down on the soft surface, which also means a washer-full of towels has to be processed every day.

It's painstaking work to keep water in the huge holding tanks the Wolfs made in a sterile condition. They created a heated pond in one of the outdoor pens that is designed to filter out feces and have the correct habitat for the grebes, who must have water to be in for physical and emotional health.

There are so many things that birds need in captivity, and one of the most fascinating is to watch grebes that splash around in their pool washing their feathers, and at the same time, making themselves water-proof through applications from their oiling glands.

Waterbirds, such as ruddy ducks and grebes, feed on



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Elise Wolf and her husband, Whitney, inspect a western grebe, one of the several waterbirds that fell out of the sky during the last snowstorm.

aquatic invertebrates in the wild, so rehabbers must purchase or raise the required food. Elise and Whitney put out a lot of their personal funds to buy boxes of mealworms, bloodworms, waxworms, krill, and smelt at around \$80 a box. Then it has to be chopped and offered to her patients in a way they can absorb the necessary nutrients to stay alive during convalescence.

And this goes on twice a day, day after day, week after week, or as is the case of Hope the trumpeter swan, month after month. Which is difficult enough, but must be carried out in relative silence, to keep the birds from imprinting on humans for food and safety.

When migrating grebes are kept in captivity while recovering from crashing in a winter storm, they must get their digestive system going again, and the food they

consume has to be nutritionally correct to replace the energy spent. Before being released back into the wild they must have the right amount of fat and time to shut down again to continue on to the wintering area.

This specialized talent and requirements for wildlife rehabbers — who have taken on the role of Citizen Scientists — puts a great many burdens on their lifestyle and personal needs. It would be almost impossible for them to continue what they do without the financial help they receive from the general public and private and business foundations.

To volunteer or to help Elise and Whitney keep their heads above water will be appreciated, and will support their dedication in putting waterbirds back in the water and song birds back into the air. Their website is www.nativebirdcare.org.

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