



Oily heroes

University students, faculty help ducks

By Harry Esteve
Of the Emerald

Sometimes journalists have to make a choice between being good at their job and being good citizens.

When I heard about the diesel spill early Friday morning, my first instinct was: Story. I waited for Emerald photo editor Bob Baker to get his gear ready, and then followed him to the Mill-

race.

The pond was empty and dead-looking. In the clear, chilly air the sharp smell of diesel lightly burned the back of my throat. The ducks were quiet and hiding in bushes surrounding the pond, as if they had chosen to suffer in private silence.

Besides myself and the photographer, there were only a few other people around. One was

speaking through a walkie-talkie and seemed "official." I asked what had happened and he told me about the diesel spill. I asked him if the ducks were in danger of dying. He told me they had only a 10 percent chance of living.

I thought about the Millrace ducks, how much they meant to the University, and the instinct returned: Bigger story.

I followed Bob around as he took pictures of ducks that looked dazed and sick. A few people came down to the pond with bread as part of their daily ritual of feeding the ducks.

I kept wondering why no one "official" had taken charge of rounding up the ducks to try and save them. And then I wondered why I wasn't doing anything. Because I'm after the story, I

answered myself, but I wasn't convinced.

At that moment, two faculty from the animal labs ran down to the pond and announced that we could start washing ducks in the labs. I made a flying grab at a duck — and missed.

It didn't take long to learn to work in pairs to trap the ducks, who by now were agitated and honking and flapping and running. More and more people were running across Franklin Boulevard to the pond. Members of the Survival Center were passing out instructions on how to wash the ducks.

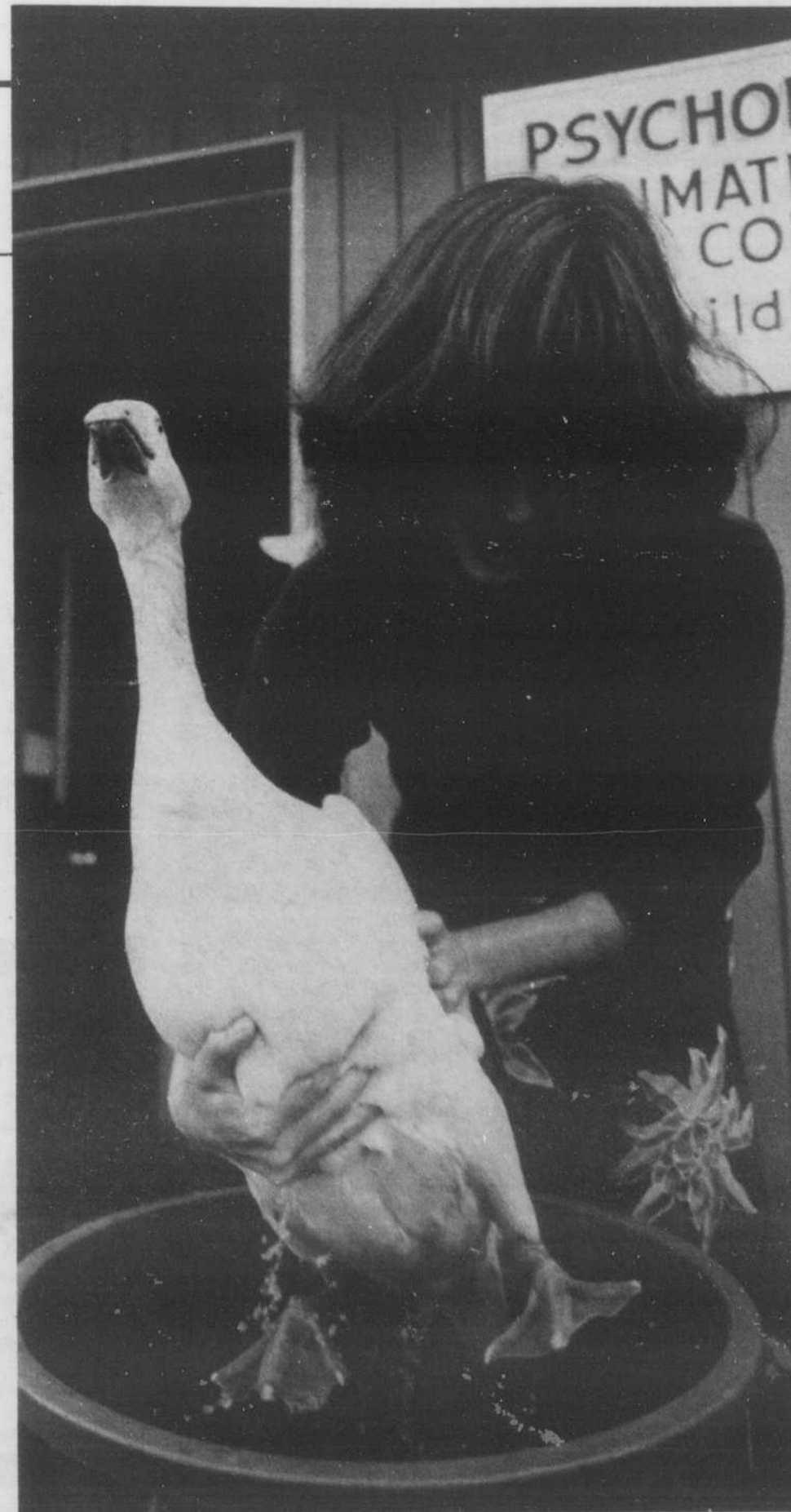
I helped dry the first duck at the animal laboratory, one that seemed to have gotten the worst of the diesel. It was already half-dead.

As the small room became overcrowded with students and ducks, I went back to the pond to catch more Ducks. At times it seemed pointless. The rumors were that once a duck was coated with fuel, it had little chance of surviving no matter what efforts were made to save it. And the facilities at the animal labs were much too small to accommodate the hundreds of ducks and geese.

But we persisted. A man with a red beard and suspenders leapt out of a canoe into the diesel-covered water to try and save a duck that appeared to be drowning.

After nearly all had been rounded up at the Millrace, I caught a ride to the University Inn, where students were doing every thing they could to keep about 50 more ducks out of the canal.

I returned to work at 4 p.m. smelling like an oil refinery. Another Emerald reporter had to write the story.



Counterclockwise, from upper left: This diesel oil-drenched duck fared worse than many of his fellow fowl in the Millrace. Two of the dozens of volunteers who aided the 338 fowl captured at the Millrace untangle a goose from the butterfly net used to catch it. Workers from Robert's Environmental Services, a private firm contracted by the state to clean the spilled diesel oil from the Millrace, use a vacuum to suck oil from the pond's surface. A pair of volunteers chase an oily duck who chose to stay in the water rather than seek safety on a drier surface. A woman cleans a stricken goose in a makeshift bathtub, using a soapy water solution.

Photos by Bob Baker

Ducks

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By 8 a.m. Friday, the Highway Department has reported the incident to the Department of Environmental Quality, says Janet Gillaspie, DEQ information officer.

Larry Lowenkron, DEQ environmental engineer was at the spill site within two hours, she says.

By noon nearly 100 volunteers were snagging ducks in butterfly nets, wading with outstretched arms after ducks, herding 10 to 20 birds at a time with volleyball nets and anxiously clutching fuel-drenched flapping geese.

The immediate concern was

to combat hypothermia, says Greg Stickrod, director for laboratory animal services of the University psychology department. The diesel dissolves water-repellent oils in the bird's feathers, allowing water into their down insulation. It's "just like getting your sleeping bag wet," Stickrod says. The result is that the ducks and geese drown.

Stickrod and his staff organized a duck wash and treatment center in the laboratory animals' building near the pond.

Volunteers washed geese and ducks in detergent and kept them warm with hair driers they

brought from home.

Canoes were launched from the University boathouse to remove ducks from the pond's islands. Pick-up trucks were sent to rescue birds next to the University inn.

Animal regulation trucks appeared on the scene and began carting geese and ducks to the agency's shelter where two veterinarians stood ready.

Imagine tube feeding, washing and rewashing 338 ducks, says Flood.

The birds have been "farmed out" to veterinary clinics and homes equipped to care for them until the water is safe, she

says.

Since geese mate for life, they must be returned so they can find each other, she says. "Their lives have been turned upside down."

Robert's Environmental Services has been hired by the highway department to clean the diesel fuel from the pond and the Millrace.

Lowenkron says the DEQ may initiate legal action against the highway department. According to Lowenkron, Oregon law states any company, group or organization causing an oil spill resulting in a "slick" is legally responsible.

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