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PORTfolio



Photos by Morgan Harper

Ardelia Secosky feeds fish to the birds in the pelican enclosure Sunday morning. Volunteers come seven mornings a week to help with day-to-day operations.

Volunteering is for the birds

Story by Morgan Harper
Editor

Ardelia Secosky has been volunteering at Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter for a year and a half, but it was years ago that she went with a friend to the Oak Island Education Center and saw the shelter's founder Mary Ellen Rogers give a presentation.

She remembers Rogers asking if she wanted to visit the shelter, and she did.

It was then, "I made up my mind when I retired I wanted to volunteer for her," said Secosky.

She moved to the area at the end of 2019 and started helping out at Sea Biscuit in 2020.

Secosky says she doesn't recall being nervous when she started volunteering with and around the birds. She says it was "surprising."

At first she thought the birds there would all be local, but it didn't take long to learn they weren't. And she says she never dreamed she would see the other birds that make their way through the gate to Sea Biscuit, at 1638 East Beach Drive.

Secosky volunteers Sundays and Wednesdays. She spent Sunday morning cleaning the deck, raking, collecting feathers, changing water and feeding the crowd in the pelican area.

She also learned about the new birds at the shelter, got updates on the ones that were there the last time she was, and caught up with those who are always there.

"I love it," she said. "There's never a dull

moment."

Guess who's coming to dinner

Visitors are welcome Monday through Friday between 8 and 10 a.m. This is when volunteers are out with the birds feeding, cleaning pens, changing water, and the birds are already being disturbed. Later they will be busy preening themselves and sleeping after their big meal and resting up for their next one.

Depending on what day of what week of what month, it's anyone's guess what birds and animals visitors will see.

They will undoubtedly meet Tim the pelican, the Sea Biscuit's longest resident. He's been there now for 12 years and has gone on countless educational programs with Rogers. He shares his enclosure with a newer permanent pelican, Tessa, who arrived two years ago.

These two welcome all kinds of birds all of the time that arrive at the shelter to rehabilitate, including right now an injured pelican brought in from Holden Beach. The same fishing wire that wrapped around his legs also wrapped around one of his wings. The pelican is getting his leg bandages changed every other day.

There is a Northern gannett from the Nova Scotia area. They usually come to feed in the Gulf Stream, and this one has aspergillosis, a respiratory disease. Rogers and her team tried to release it a month ago and when it was dropped off at a boat ramp, they found it between two cars a little while later, not quite ready to venture out on its own, so it's back at Sea Biscuit.

And last but not least there's a ring-

billed gull that was driven down from Asheville.

"A lady had it, and its wing was broken," Rogers explained. The lady plucked it, stapled it, and stitched its wing before it arrived. The bird was off balance, and couldn't fly. It's a beautiful gull with orange rings around its eyes, though right now it looks a little worse for the wear, but once it's ready it will be released.

Everyone who comes by meets owls, Bogey and Benson. And there's longtime part-time resident Stella, a white egret who is not in a pen but drops by most days to say hello and have a meal. She came to Sea Biscuit many years ago for rehabilitation and after her release, kept returning. Even when she leaves for winter migration, Stella returns when the weather turns warm, and it's not surprising to see her most days in the spring, summer and fall around the shelter and on the roof checking on how things are going.

There isn't anyone who doesn't enjoy a visit from Stella.

There's always room for more

This past weekend, other birds volunteers could be found tending to Scarlet, another permanent resident at Sea Biscuit like Tim and Tessa. The Red-tailed Hawk arrived in 2012 from Lake Waccamaw, with the tip of her wing cut off. Glenda, another Red-tailed Hawk who has been known as the "town hall hawk," lives with Scarlett, and these two are currently caring for and raising an eight-week-old Red-tailed Hawk that arrived in late June. When it came to Sea Biscuit it was the size of Rogers' fist, and now after only a few weeks is almost the size of Scarlett and Glenda.

There is also a red shouldered hawk that arrived from Leland recuperating from wing damage that's almost ready to be released: once it is able to catch mice on its own, it will be ready to go.

Shearwaters are birds you won't find in our area, but you could at Sea Biscuit over the past couple of weeks. Rogers started off with 11 of them but is down to two now. The birds came in with Hurricane Elsa. They're supposed to weigh 840 grams and these weigh 400. The longest she's had one survive is 19 days. Rogers will feed them a mixture of chicken baby food and salmon oil and care for them until they pass away. It's impossible to get them to where they need to be - South America.

In a large cage with a young crow is a bird that Rogers and the volunteers don't know what to call. It was found in the ocean and resembles a great-tailed grackle, but the great-tailed grackle doesn't have white on them and this bird does.

The crow is around three months old, and crows usually stay with their parent until they are six months old. Its eyes are still blue.

On Saturday morning there was a tiny barn swallow in the incubator; by Sunday morning there was another tiny bird that was found in St. James (most likely dropped by a predator) in there to keep it company.

By Sunday morning a seagull had arrived from Myrtle Beach with a broken wing - it had been struck by a car. It wrapped in pain medicine and had its wing wrapped. It would most likely be eutha-



Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter founder Mary Ellen Rogers (front) and volunteer Ardelia Secosky prepare different foods for the birds and raptors.

nized.

And there is also a fawn that, along with its mother, was struck by a car. The mother was killed and the fawn sustained head trauma but is doing really well. Once it is able to eat grass by itself and no longer require a bottle, the young deer will be released.

Doesn't have a favorite

Sea Biscuit has around 20 seven-day-a-week onsite clinic volunteers and 25-30 outlying volunteers who rescue and transport birds.

Some volunteers do both, like Cheryl Vogel. She and her husband also transport birds to Sea Biscuit from the Southport area. She volunteers every Saturday morning, and will be on call if needed.

Vogel says she has always wanted to work with animals. She left New York after retiring from working with special education students, and now she is the one learning new things.

She enjoys being around the animals at Sea Biscuit - and she also volunteers at a couple of horse farms.

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Volunteer Liz Lezius bottle feeds a fawn at Sea Biscuit Sunday morning. Once the fawn, which was struck by a car, can eat grass on its own and no longer needs the bottle it will be ready to be released.



Stella stops by Sea Biscuit for a snack. The egret was rescued, rehabilitated and released years ago and still returns often.



Veterinarian Dr. Kristen Colleran, right, tends to fishing wire cuts on a pelican's legs while Sea Biscuit founder Mary Ellen Rogers holds and tries to calm the bird.

Rescue, rehabilitate and return to the wild

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"The pelis are really easy," she says, and recalls there being 20 in the pen at one time. "They're goofy birds, but they're beautiful flyers."

She also likes the vultures.

"They're clean, and they don't mess with you."

Vogel says that she just enjoys the whole experience of volunteering at Sea Biscuit.

"It's definitely an education."

Give them a better chance of survival

Dr. Kristen Colleran, who has been volunteering her services at Sea Biscuit for almost three years, comes once a week usually on Friday or Saturday.

Colleran says when she comes to the shelter there could be one animal to treat, and there could be as many as 12 or 13, and a lot of them have to be euthanized.

"The goal is to return (them) to the wild. You have to judge if they can be returned in a timely fashion."

Sea Biscuit sees a good number of femoral fractures, fractures of elbows (especially with pelicans), and eye injuries.

Fractures usually mean the bird has been hit by a car. Head traumas are typically indicative of a window strike.

On Saturday Colleran examined a young turkey from Supply that came in Friday and was only a couple of months old. It had come from the county shelter, and had been at Sea Biscuit for just a day when it was checked out by the vet. It couldn't stand up on its own, and after examining the bird with her hands she said it could have a fracture, that the problem could be spinal, or could be neurological.

X-raying would help, she said, but Sea Biscuit doesn't have an onsite x-ray machine.

"Every bird should be x-rayed," said Colleran. Just taking an injured bird to a vet's office could cause enough stress to kill it before it even got there, but there isn't one on site.

Aside from physical injury, once a bird is injured stress can cause a quick death. Colleran pointed out that it is important to remember that if someone catches a bird and wants to bring it to Sea Biscuit, to try to transport them in a box or carrier, and to cover the bird and keep them in a quiet and dark environment. Keeping the car radio turned off or low will help to keep it calm as well.

"They're already stressed," she says. "The quiet gives them a better chance of survival."

Birds of a feather depend on the weather

Typically, Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter takes in an average of 500 birds a year. By this past Sunday, the shelter was up to 485 birds for 2021. The shelter receives four to five phone calls every day from people who have/need help with a bird.

Rogers says a lot of the birds that come in are due to habitat destruction.

Changes in weather too bring different birds to Sea Biscuit. In

the winter, there are often many pelicans with frostbite on their webbed feet. And then there are the storms.

"Hurricanes bring the weirdos," Rogers says. "If you have a hurricane, you're going to get weirdos."

Weirdos, meaning birds that are not from our area - like peregrines, which are falcons usually found in the mountains or on cliffs. It's unlikely to find a mountain bird on the coast, but Rogers once received a call from a man on the West End of the island who said he had a peregrine under his deck. And he did: a blond Tundra Peregrine.

Before Hurricane Florence arrived in 2018, Sea Biscuit housed a Pomarine Jaeger, which are from Maine. Luckily two girls from New Hampshire came by the shelter in hopes of touring the grounds, and gave the northern seabird a ride up to rehab facility in Maine.

And the shearwaters were washed ashore by the heavy winds and waves around Tropical Storm Elsa a few weeks ago. It was the first time the shelter housed all four different species of shearwaters at one time: Audubon's, Sooty, Cory's, and Great (the species of the two still there).

'It's the big win'

Liz Lezius started volunteering in September 2020 after her family moved to the island in 2018, and has time to volunteer on the weekends while her son is with his dad.

"I like being able to help animals and the birds, and being able to get up close to the wildlife," said Lezius.

"I've learned so much from Mary Ellen," she added. "She's incredible. I have so much admiration and respect for her."

She love the owls and the pelicans, and says feeding the pelicans is always hilarious. Lezius also likes to feed baby birds when they're there, and enjoys when fawns, like the one she fed on Sunday morning, come to the shelter too.

But she says the very best part is releasing the birds.

Liz has released a barred owl and a screech owl, and a couple of pelicans with Ardeia one Sunday morning, and an owl and loons when she accompanied Rogers on a release at the Oak Island Nature Center.

"Then we've really accomplished what we've set out to do," she said. "It's the big win."

To be that close is a blessing

When Noelle Khatib moved to Oak Island, someone she met told her she should go see the "bird lady," so she did and offered her help. The lady said she didn't need any help, but to check back with her. When she checked back, the lady told her to feed the pelicans, and she did.

That was 10 years ago and Khatib and Rogers have been working with birds together ever since.

"I really like being in the presence of birds," Khatib explained. "I love the energy they give off."

She also enjoys cleaning at the shelter, medicating birds that need it, just being around them and educating others so that

birds can be kept safe.

She likes to see others experience being up close to the birds when she accompanies Rogers on educational field trips. When people develop relationships with wildlife, they think twice about them when they see one close to the road next time.

Khatib explained she'll tell people about owls, how they have tunnel vision and can't see a car coming. "Once they see one up close and know, maybe they won't hit one when they're driving," she explained.

Khatib isn't nervous around the birds and raptors she cares for at Sea Biscuit. She recalls once when someone dropped off a beaver, and she and Rogers put it in a large plastic tub and transported it to Lockwood Folly to release it.

"That was kinda scary," she said. But birds?

"To be that close with them, it's just a real blessing," says Khatib.

She compared the thrill of volunteering at Sea Biscuit with the excitement one might feel if they met a celebrity.

"I could care less about meeting a celebrity," said Khatib. "I get to handle these birds."

'She's selfless ... knows she'll get it done.'

The Sea Biscuit volunteers learn something from Rogers and the birds every time they come to volunteer.

"I go home and I read about them and learn more," Secoscky said.

She enjoys the routine of seeing the birds week after week, and seeing (them) released. And Secoscky admits there are the difficult parts, like letting a sick bird go.

"When (the birds) have to be euthanized it's hard," said Secoscky. "Like the shearwaters. It's hard. But the (overall) success rate is good."

Watching the kindness of the birds is one thing that isn't hard. It's fascinating and volunteers experience it, like how Tim acts as a mentor to all of the birds that come through the pelican pen. Secoscky recalls once there was a new pelican who wasn't going to the fish when they were brought to eat. Tim saw this and pushed a fish to the new pelican.

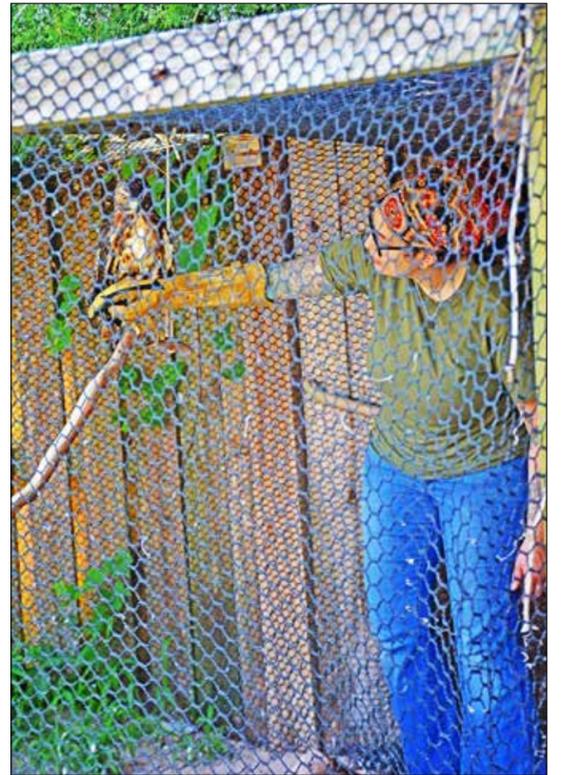
And when Tessa the pelican, who can't lay eggs but builds a nest because it's natural for her to do, needed sticks and items to make one Stella brought sticks to the top of the enclosure and dropped them through the small holes to help Tessa build.

"I guess we underestimate the intelligence of animals," Secoscky said.

One thing not underestimated is the tenacity of Rogers by her volunteers. They call her "dynamic," "an asset to this area," they say that "she doesn't seem to get frustrated," and that her "energy is amazing."

Khatib summed up Rogers and her own volunteerism best: "She's 100-percent action-based," says Khatib. "She's a remarkable human being," Khatin says of Rogers. "She's selfless, she doesn't need much."

"She just knows she'll get it done."



Khatib holds two-year-old Red-tailed Hawk Maggie on her arm last Sunday. She has experience training many of the raptors at Sea Biscuit.