

Vulture Rescue

“Stop, I see something”, Laurie yells from the passenger seat. I was preparing to pull onto a 2 lane road outside our neighborhood and hadn’t seen any traffic. I still didn’t see any traffic....

She excitedly points to the right, “there’s an injured bird in the bushes over there!” Sure enough, a few car lengths from the shoulder a big black vulture is limping, dragging a wing, & struggling to get further into the bushes.

Seeing us, it struggles even more and with good reason. Imagine, you’re feasting in the road when Wham!! a giant, shiny object knocks the beejesus out of you. Injured from the blow, you gasp for breath and struggle to get as far away as possible. The big shiny object keeps going and you can now tend your wounds. But wait, here comes another big shiny object. Now 2 giants come out and head over to you. You thought the day was bad before, it’s looking like it’s about to get worse.... Yeah, I’d run like hell too!

As volunteers at state parks and animal rescue organizations, we’re experienced with rescuing and relocating injured wildlife. From turtles in the middle of the road, to birds that have been hit by cars, we’ve seen a little bit of everything.

Capturing a bird is a much different challenge, because if it can fly away you won’t be able to rescue it. By the looks of this guy, he ain’t flying anywhere. However, nature is on his side as he slips into the wild, un-groomed area of our neighborhood. This is the real Florida....Sunlight creeps its way to the ground passing through vines, thorns, poison ivy, big trees, little trees, and the infamous Saw palmettos.

We have to go in to this natural area to retrieve this bird, so we look for potential openings in the undergrowth and begin the task of forcing the bird to an open area. Sounds easy enough, it’s just one bird and there are two of us.

We start tiptoeing in; over, under, around, through; any way possible to get this guy to move out where we can catch him. At one point I’m successfully making my way through the jungle of foliage when a large saw palmetto blocks forward progress. I look around and can barely see the sun; vines are running in a confused maze above me, and branches have me blocked in. I was so focused on moving forward that I wasn’t thinking about anything else. Now I’m wondering 2 things; how did I get in here and how will I get out.

Two hours later, (yes two hours!) I am covered in sweat, my arms & legs look like I’ve been clawed by a cat, and this bird is still at bay. We were planning a bike ride, so shorts & t-shirt are the attire. Not the best for trekking through “natural Florida” at its best.

I finally give up and yell “I’m going home!!!.....and putting on some pants and boots”. I briefly thought of just driving away and not telling her where I was going, but I decided to behave.

10 minutes later I return, a new man; old thick jeans, hiking boots, ice cold water, and a brief stint in the A/C. I am man, show me this bird!!!

Like Godzilla stomping through Tokyo, I stomp my way through the brush. Path? I don't need no stinkin' path. We force the vulture toward an open area and finally corner it. Laurie is on one side and I'm on the other. The only way out is by one of us and we're ready with towels and eager anticipation.

It moves right and we move right, it moves left and we move left. It moves right again, but like a pro running back, pulls up short (a fake, are you kidding me!) and immediately heads left. I quickly recover and reach out to grab it. It takes 2 long steps and then takes flight!! It crash lands about a block away and looks back. Unbelievable! After all this time, it just freakin' flies off. Not only that, I was faked out by a vulture, I can just see the highlights; watch this folks, this small receiver is double teamed, but wait, he fakes out not one but BOTH of them. UNBELIEVABLE! He....could....go.....all....the....way! Who knew birds watched Sports Center?

I'm leaning against my SUV drinking what was cold water, reflecting on the events when Laurie heads off to where it landed. "If it wasn't injured, it would have flown away". "Whatever, I still don't think it's that injured", I reply. 5 minutes later, she victoriously parades out with the bird in hand. Almost choking on my water, I strain to look. Seriously? You caught it? Never underestimate determination and focus.....

Yep, in the carrier it went and off to our local wildlife hospital. It was treated, brought up to healthy weight, and then released back into the wild. We still laugh about that story and what we went through, but each time we see a vulture flying over, we can't help but look up and wonder. Hmmm...does it remember.

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