

# THE LONG BUT TRUE STORY OF CHARLES DeGULL

Bing Sherrill

Many years ago, in November, I called my sister and brother-in-law. They told me that on a recent, rainy evening, they were driving near the Chesapeake Bay, when they saw movement on the road.

They found a Ring Bill Seagull lying on the road with a broken lower bill, alive but weak from hunger. My sister knew that there are an estimated seven million Ring Bills. Losing one will not hurt the population, but how could they say this particular Ring Bill was expendable. They took it home.

Their daughter had left for college, so her bedroom was available. They draped the bed and floor with tarpaulins. The gull was given the room. He assumed that he had a lease.

In my December call, they reported finding a vet who stitched the beak back in place. Now the gull was having a post-operative recuperation period in the bedroom.

In January, I inquired about the bird's health. There was a problem. The gull had developed warts around the stitched area. Since that condition made eating difficult for the bird, they would continue bed rest until the warts went away.

In my February phone call, I inquired again about the bird's health. The warts had gone away, and they had named the bird Charles DeGull.

"Have you released it back to the wild?" I asked.

"Well, no because there is another problem."

"What?"

"Since Charles has been inside for so long, he has developed a bad case of Bumble Foot, sort of athlete's foot for seagulls."

"Oh no. Now what?"

My sister told me that the cure is to wash the gull's feet with Lavorice four times a day. I asked how they did that task.

My brother-in-law replied, "It is difficult. I take a pan of Lavorice into the room. Then I grab Charles and stick his feet in the pan. He doesn't like it. The process is a bit messy."

In my March phone call, I asked how the bird was doing.

My sister reported, "The bumble foot has gone away, but we are worried that Charles been away from the ocean for so long that he has forgotten how to swim."

"Oh no, now what?"

"Well, in December when Charles came to live with us, we bought a puddle duck and put it in his room, but lately, he seems to be having trouble swimming. So now I hold him in the water a couple of times a day."

"Seagull swimming lessons."

"Right."

In April, I asked how the swimming was going.

"We figured out that Charles' problem isn't swimming; it's floating. He is so distraught being cooped up in this room that he doesn't groom his feathers, you know, runs his bill through his feathers to straighten them and spread the oil."

"Oh no, now what?"

"Now I spray him with a little water 6 times a day. That makes him groom."

In May, I asked how the spritzing and grooming were going.

With a sigh, my sister said, "Unfortunately, the problem is not grooming, His feathers have lost their oil, and they have to be replaced with new ones."

Sympathetically I said, "I suppose that means an expensive feather transplant...?"

"Oh no, we just wait until he molts and gets new feathers"

"When?" I said.

"August." she said.

When I called in June, I knew that Charles would still be waiting for the August molt. Instead I inquired how they were feeding Charles.

"In the beginning," my brother-in-law replied, "we gave him goldfish, but at 10 cents each, we limited him to 6 per meal. Once, when we were away for two days, a friend

was bird sitting for us and let Charles take as much as he wanted. He ate our whole two-week supply.”

“Are you still feeding him the 6 goldfish?”

“No, we have changed his diet to Smelt. One rainy day when I was in the pet- food store buying 24 goldfish, the clerk asked what we are doing with so many small goldfish. When I told him, he and a lady customer got very upset and began yelling about feeding pets to a seagull. She tried to hit me with her umbrella.”

“After that embarrassing incident, we decided to go with frozen smelt. It comes in a big box, it’s cheaper, and nobody gives me a hard time in the grocery store. Charles seems to like smelt too. Actually, he’s not very particular about what he eats.”

In my July phone call, I found out that the molting had started. For all the seagulls that I have seen, I never realized that they get new feathers each year.

In the August phone call, I expected to hear that Charles has flown away with his new feathers.

Instead my brother-in-law told me that the new feathers had solved the floating/swimming problem, but they had a new concern, bird socialization.

They explained that Charles had been with people (them) and without any bird contact for months. They wanted to figure out how to get Charles to think of himself as a bird. Now Charles needed bird therapy.

By late August, my sister had developed a plan for reintroducing Charles to his native species. They would rent a cottage on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay. Not just any cottage; a cottage with a porch and a view of the water. They would then put Charles in a cage on that porch so that he could observe seagull society for several weeks before joining it.

“It’s September, is he gone?”

“Yes!”

“Wonderful, now you can get back to your own lives.”

“That’s true; we have a lot more freedom now that Charles is out of his cage. Of course, we have to be here each morning and afternoon to give him his meds.”

“His medicine?”

"Yes, you see, Charles was looking rather sickly after we released him. So, we started to give him some antibiotics and vitamins."

"If he is flying around the Bay with other seagulls, how do you give him his...stuff?"

"Bread. All the seagulls come when we scatter bread on the beach. Then we run out with a smelt that we have stuffed with the pills and give it to Charles."

Three months after my sister and brother-in-law gave Charles his freedom, he gave them theirs by migrating. By then they had noticed another seagull; this one was quite healthy but it had unusual markings. There were black spots just behind its eyes.

They called him Blacky, but that is another story.