Being Human: The Problem of Imprinting in Predatory Birds

By Sarah Yeend

Any child who has watched "Fly Away Home" or read Frightful's Mountain is familiar with the behavioral phenomenon called imprinting. These are beautiful stories about the connection a person can form with a young wild animal. In them, normal people rescue baby birds, teach them to fly and then release them into the wild where they live long happy lives. That is Hollywood—this is reality. In real life, people who find or take a wild chick end up with an animal scarred both inside and out and totally convinced that it is human. The only thing that can be done for a bird that has imprinted is to provide it with a safe place to live out its days. As a raptor handler, I am in a position to observe these birds' pain, and I work to be part of the solution for this problem. Imprinting must be stopped at its source, human ignorance, and it is this cause that I have devoted myself to.

One of the main reasons imprinting happens is because the public is not educated about what it is and how it happens. The Audubon Society of Portland, a noted rehabilitation center, describes imprinting as "how many animals decide who they are. It is a critical behavioral process in a growing animal and occurs during a period in which the young establish the concept of parent and self … [irreversibly]." In the natural world, young chicks imprint on their parents and learn "who will care for them, and subsequently, learn species identity and the kind of bird they should mate with later in life" (Campbell, Reece, and Mitchell 1061). When a human takes a chick during this critical period, that bird will grow up convinced it is a person, unable to hunt, unable to

find a mate, and in many cases so mentally damaged it can't function without constant care. These animals are dumped on wildlife care centers where they live long past their wild lifespan but never reach their full potential.

My name is Sarah Yeend and when I was younger I read the book Frightful's Mountain. I wanted that personal connection with an animal, and among my arsenal of misconceptions I thought that imprinting was harmless and would only bring a person closer to a wild animal. As a freshman in high school, I started volunteering at Sardis Raptor Center, a nonprofit organization devoted to the care and rehabilitation of predatory birds. My first day, I came into the clinic full of incorrect ideas about how rehabilitation worked and I was half hoping someone was going to drop a chick into my hand and say "here take care of it." Instead I was introduced to the old man in the cage, who taught me how far off my assumptions had been. His name was Mote and he was crippled. At 12 years old and about a foot tall, he looked like a barn owl but on the inside he was a grouchy old man. It is his story that stripped away my illusions and inspired me to educate others about imprinting before they could make the same mistake I had often contemplated in the past. Mote was taken from his nest when he was very young by a family who thought it would be cool to raise him. His home was a small parrot cage and he was kept inside at all times. He was fed ground beef and chicken hearts without the proper nutrients so that the joints in his wings fused together and crippled him with the bird equivalent of Rickets Disease. To this day we can't leave him alone at night without a light because he is afraid of the dark; he is also afraid of live mice, his natural prey in the wild. The people who had him finally decided they didn't want the poor crippled creature they had created, so he came to us. As a complete imprint, Mote is convinced he

is human and is entirely dependent on people for his every need. Though imprinting is purely psychological, Mote is living proof that the damage people do to the chicks they find also horrendously affects their physical well-being. Another sub-level of imprinting that drastically alters a birds life is sexual imprinting; Mote like any other imprint has the biggest identity crisis imaginable even to the point of being attracted to humans instead of birds. Every mating season Mote attempts to woo his lady love, Sardis' director Sharon, for whom he has had an undying devotion too ever since he came to us. As one of my fellow volunteers said, "The only 'upside' to his situation is that he has no idea he's supposed to be any other way" (McCaffree Resident Spotlight) and that is all the mercy life has given to these creatures—they don't know how broken they are or how much of life they are missing.

Nothing can be done for Mote and his fellow imprints but there is hope for future generations, if the message is spread. To achieve this goal, Sardis Raptor Center tries to reach a wider audience and educate the public on the damage they can do to wildlife, an objective I am personally involved with. As well as working as a bird handler, I am currently training to become an official orator for our facility. As part of my job, I will give tours of Sardis and introduce the public to each of our birds, many of them with stories as sad as Mote's. If we wish people to be aware of the consequences of imprinting, then it is vital that they see first hand the ravages it causes. We believe that though articles and pictures may get the message across, nothing changes a person on a deep level like meeting an affected animal face-to-face. It makes more of an impact when people can see first hand the result of their actions. To spread our message to the wider world "some of our… trained birds travel all around Washington State with our education

program Hunters of the Sky, which takes live birds to county fairs, school programs, libraries, state parks, and other events" (McCaffree About Sardis). In these shows, volunteers like me share Mote's story and the stories of others like him with our audiences. My hope is that their tales can have the same life-changing affect on others as they had on me. Imprinting cannot be reversed so it is absolutely vital that people receive this education if we are to protect our wildlife.

Even after hearing our program most people do not grasp the full impact of imprinting with its wide reaching consequences for all involved. The influx of imprinted birds on clinics world-wide has dramatic effects on their ability to care for other patients. For instance Mote is twelve years old but the average lifespan for a barn owl in the wild is about two years (Lewis). This means that Mote and other imprints take up much needed money, space and resources long past their natural life span which makes it impossible for rehab centers to care for all the potentially releasable wildlife. As a handler of predatory birds, I know what their power and freedom feel like because they have sat on my falconry glove in all their glory. There is nothing more satisfying than taking a critically injured raptor and working with it until it can be released once more into the wild. Because I know the pride and happiness that comes from releasing a bird, I can't help but pity the imprints that are forever left behind. Part of the reason I feel so drawn to imprinting prevention is because the act is committed for the most part by normal people. It is not hardened criminals who deny these birds the sky but little girls who find a chick that fell from the nest and decide to take it home—little girls who could have been me. The education needed to bring an end to imprinting is possible, and I for

one intend to be part of the solution. I spread Mote's story to you just as it was told to me and know I am making a difference.

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