

Good Housekeeping, January, 1996
Earning Her Wings

Rosie Mestel

Linda Evans' home in Laguna Niguel, CA, looks much like any other on her street until you pass through the gate to her backyard. Sick or injured wild birds are everywhere: a goose here, a cormorant there, mourning doves snoozing in incubators, a couple of excited baby night herons, hopping and screeching. But mostly there are brown pelicans, perched on wooden stumps and posts, watching the action.

Evans feeds her "patients" in the late afternoon. To administer some protein-rich food to a sick petrel, she grasps the reluctant bird gently but firmly and threads a long plastic tube down into its stomach. Next is a graceful long-necked grebe, followed by a young pelican, a bird so big Evans' arm seems to vanish down its throat before the feeding tube slips into place.

For 20 years, Evans 48, has been caring for such feathered waifs, found sick, starving, or injured. In 1986 she and her veterinarian/biologist husband, Richard, set up the Pacific Wildlife Project, a volunteer group that rescues wild birds (mostly brown pelicans) from Los Angeles to San Diego County. Their garage became a clinic, their backyard an aviary. "We don't turn away anything that needs help," says Evans.

Some of the wounds are horrific. A pelican they named "Arrow" had been deliberately shot with an arrow, and the shaft had passed through its body. The bird will eventually go to the zoo, since its wing is permanently damaged. But whenever possible, birds are released back into the wild.

Evans' love of birds goes back to her childhood in rural northern Florida. "My mother was always rescuing something....baby birds, baby squirrels, cats," she says. "I grew up with the ethic." When she first moved to Laguna Niguel, children started showing up at her door with injured songbirds: "I've no idea why I was singled out. Maybe I had a mark on my forehead or something."

Before she knew it, she was taking classes in animal care and volunteering with bird rehab experts. In 1982 she began working as a veterinary assistant-and devoting more and more personal time to her

passion. She met Richard when she was referred to him for a problem with an ailing mockingbird. They married a year and a half later.

When the couple first launched the wildlife project, they had cages of birds all over the house, even an occasional grebe in the bathtub. "It was an infernal mess," chuckles Evans, whose living room today contains dozens of bird figurines and bird paintings.....but no flesh-and-blood birds.

Though she wryly describes her current role as "chief cook and cage-washer," there's a lot more to it, including dressing wounds, admitting and releasing birds, raising funds, and training volunteers. Richard, who works as chief vet for Orange County, makes the medical decisions. The project has no outside financing; donations come from fellow bird and animal lovers.

The reward, for Evans, is being around birds, and watching them grow healthy and fly free again. She isn't deterred by the countless ones that fail to make it, though more than one has made her cry. Even now, she starts to choke up when describing Stormy the pelican, who arrived at the clinic a battered mess of wounds and died just when they thought he was rallying. "I tell my volunteers that no matter how strong or detached you are, you'll have your heart broken," she says. "But I can't stop doing it because one bird breaks my heart. There are others out there that need help."