

Black swan survives strange odyssey, stormy seas

By FRASER LANG and PIPPA JACK / The Block Island Times | Posted: Friday, September 2, 2011 10:00 am



The Block Island Times Block Island Times editor Pippa Jack asked if her paper could use our photo of the black swan that appeared in Tuesday's edition for their story about his return. We agreed, and asked for their story so we could provide a proper ending to this Misquamicut mystery.

Two black swans left Connecticut last week, arriving at the Abrams Animal Farm barn on Block Island on Thursday, Aug. 25, just in time to hunker down as Hurricane Irene moved up the coast. By last Friday, one was mysteriously missing, reappearing days later in storm surf miles away in Westerly as Irene bore down.

Firefighters rescued the 4- year-old male early Sunday morning, just before Irene was downgraded to a tropical storm as it hit Rhode Island's southern coast. The bird has spent the days since touring the state, moving from Misquamicut's Andrea Hotel to animal shelters in Saunderstown and Tiverton.

He was due to return to the island today, miraculously unhurt.

"He has done so much traveling," said Wendy Taylor Humphrey, who runs the West Place Animal Sanctuary in Tiverton, where the swan most recently was resting. "It's amazing that he made it. The firefighter who went in and got him did a great thing - most people would have looked and kept going."

The swan can't fly. He's either been pinioned - when wing feathers are surgically removed - or is moulting, but either way "he doesn't have flight capability," Humphrey said.

So was he swept across 14 miles of sea for two days by the southerly winds that preceded the hurricane? "It seems to be the only possibility," Humphreys said.

Misquamicut Volunteer Fire Chief Louis Misto met his crew at 6 a.m. Sunday morning to inspect the waterfront as high tide and storm surges from Irene drew near. At Clark Avenue Beach, between the Andrea and the Pleasant View Inn, they saw a black bird struggling in the 10-foot waves.

"He was really in a tough place," Misto said. "He was getting swept back a hundred feet, then a big wave would come and sweep him up against a dune that had a sand fence in front of it. It was hard to look at."

Misto, who had never seen a black swan before and initially thought the bird was a goose, says he was half joking when he asked, "All right, who's going to go in and get him?"

But one of his men, Stephen Deperry, didn't hesitate. "I'll do it," Deperry told Misto, before wading out into the surf, grabbing the bird and throwing it up over the sand fence.

"The area he was found at is completely destroyed now," Misto said. "I'm amazed he's pulled through."

The swan, able to walk haltingly, stayed in the area through the night.

"The bird was shaken up and dehydrated," said Andrea Hotel manager Todd Findeisen, who's also assistant fire chief and helped in the swan's rescue. Findeisen said the bird spent Monday morning on the hotel patio, where staff offered him mesclun salad and grapes and were won over by his friendly personality.

Later that day, Gov. Lincoln Chafee and Department of Environmental Management staff toured the Andrea to assess storm damage. After seeing the exhausted bird, said DEM spokeswoman Gail Mastrati, staff took it to the Wildlife Clinic in Saunderstown. The clinic called Humphrey, who specializes in swan, duck and turkey rescue.

"They tube fed him at the clinic because he wasn't eating on his own," Humphrey said. "He was a little battered and depressed, but he perked up when he saw all the other waterfowl here. He started squawking and making lots of noise, and eating bugs and grass."

The black swan even went for a swim in the pond on Humphrey's 8-acre property Wednesday night with two mute swans, Humphrey said.

How he escaped from the Abrams Animal Farm remains a mystery. There is no way that the swan could have escaped the cage on its own, said Debbie Jo Horton, the partner of animal farm owner Justin Abrams. And it left its mate in the cage.

The farm is investigating how the swan disappeared sometime between feedings last Friday morning and last Friday evening. Horton said that black swans, unlike their white cousins, prefer salt water to fresh. Perhaps, she said, it made its way down to the sea once free.

One thing's for sure: It's thanks to the Internet that he's returning. Abrams' partner, Debbie Jo Horton, emailed The Block Island Times on Sunday to ask that the swan's disappearance be posted on the paper's website.

Over the next few days, some 200 people read the brief announcement.

Word reached Humphrey's husband, who was researching where the swan could have come from, and once Humphrey had established that it was the same bird, using a band on his leg, she cleared Abrams and Horton to get him.

"We kept saying that it's not possible," Horton says. "But there are not that many black swans in New England, and the band is unusual. We're still going to be questioning it until we actually go see it."

Calls have been coming in from people offering to adopt the swan since The Westerly Sun ran a photo of him on Tuesday.

All swans mate for life, Humphrey says. Black swans are from Australia and are much rarer than mute swans, which naturalized here from Asia. They're seldom seen in the United States in the wild, and make good pets.

"Swans raised in captivity are very sweet, very tame; they will follow you around like a feathered dog," Humphrey said. "And this guy has a great disposition. He's going through a lot, but he's very laid back."