

Great Blue Heron

by Emilie Alfino

When an adult great blue heron arrived at CROW July 13, no history came with him. (You can't be sure of the sex of an adult great blue heron, but we'll refer to the patient as "he.")

He was lying down all day his first day at CROW, very dull and quiet, according to Dr. Jess Brugler, and he was also dehydrated. Still, he tried to bite someone. "Heron is very aggressive birds," Dr. Jess explained. But after that first attempt, he let the staff try to help him. "He was very weak and couldn't hold his head up very well. When we went to look in his mouth, it was very easy for us to do and he didn't try to shut it on us," Dr. Jess added.

Something that greatly disturbed CROW staff was that his third eyelid didn't blink at all on either side. The third eyelid is a clear membrane that dogs and cats also have. It is very important to birds, especially water birds. They can see through it, and it can allow them to look for food or predators while keeping their eyes lubricated and free of salt and sand. "That in itself gave us some idea what was going on: weakness, lack of a blink response – those symptoms indicate some kind of toxicosis," said Dr. Jess. Toxicosis simply means any abnormal condition caused by poison.

"It could have been a lot of things," Dr. Jess clarified. "These birds sometimes get into chemicals in people's backyards, it could have been something in the water he drank, red tide, rain washing things into the water, or eating a fish that was infected. A lot of the causes are natural, but some of them are not."

The heron did not receive a wide variety of treatments. Dr. Jess was most concerned about dehydration and the fact that he wasn't eating well. "He was pretty thin," she said. He was given subcutaneous fluids and some oral foods with a few herbs and homeopathic remedies. One of them is called Four Gentlemen. It helps promote good digestion and helps stimulate appetite. "We use it a lot," said Dr. Jess. "It's one of our staples here."

He also received Liver Detox, which is actually for humans. For a bird the size of a heron, the dose is a couple of drops in a solution (there's also a spray). Vitamins rounded out his treatment.

"A lot of patients get vitamins B and C. It helps with immunity, appetite and overall health," Dr. Jess explained.

Still, at this point the heron couldn't even stand up and was in a cage with a little nest to help him prop himself up. He was being administered artificial teardrops since he couldn't blink. For a couple of days he stayed about the same. Two days later he started holding his head up although he couldn't stand. "We did some physical therapy with him, stretching his wings and legs so they wouldn't get cramped and would remember what they were supposed to be doing," said Dr. Jess. The next day, staff started putting the big bird in the tub and to hand feed him a couple of small fish – not too much at once, as that can cause regurgitation.

By July 17 he was starting to get his blink responses back. "He had full response in his left eye and about half in his right eye," Dr. Jess stated. He was hand fed again for the second day in a row. The next day – just five days after arriving at CROW – the patient was able to sit up on his hocks (the hocks are the joints in the legs that correspond anatomically to the ankle in humans). "He was kind of holding himself up on his wings on the edge of the tub," Dr. Jess said. "That was amazing for us to see." Staff continued to do that in the tub the next day and progressed to doing it in his cage the day following that.

By July 20, CROW staff was continuing the same treatments and hand-feeding him when he actually pulled fish out of his pool,



A great blue heron healed quickly in the care of CROW staff

making an attempt although he did need assistance to eat them. He stayed that way for a couple of days.

Two days later, he was more reliably sitting up on his hocks and in the tub actually used his wings to sit up fully on his feet. "We decided to stop the tub treatment because if he was able to get down from the tub he could hurt himself or someone in the clinic," Dr. Jess explained. "A great heron is not the type of bird you want running around the clinic. They could be dangerous."

He finally ate a fish on his own overnight three days later and was still up on his hocks. The Liver Detox was discontinued and staff stopped hand feeding him to see what he would do and, sure enough, he ate two more fish on his own. The following night, he ate all the fish staff left for him; the subcutaneous fluids were stopped and his oral medication was cut to once daily instead of twice.

"July 26 was a big day for him," Dr. Jess smiled. "He was eating well. He was standing in his cage reliably. We moved him to a smaller cage inside so he could stretch out some. Each time I went out to see him, he was up on a perch or shelf, which was very promising. We monitored his appetite and he was eating very well and was very active."

About a week later, the heron was moved to a larger cage where he could actually fly and staff could continue to monitor his flight to make sure that he was getting lift properly, flying without a lot of noise, and that his lift was adequate to fly up and around things. He spent just over two weeks in the large cage getting his bearings and practicing.

The great blue heron was released August 18 in Fort Myers as close as possible to the place where he was found, as is CROW's practice. This is especially important for a great blue heron as they are very territorial and, if released somewhere other than "home," he would most likely compete for someone else's territory.

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a non-profit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to PO Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Call 472-3644 or visit: www.crowclinic.org. ✨

