

CROW Case of the Week: **Sandwich Tern**

by **Brian Johnson**



On the morning of November 18 Mary Foshager was headed west on the Sanibel beaches from her Gulf-front condo when she saw a most unusual sight: a little 220-gram Sandwich Tern helplessly trying to get his foot out of the jaws of a live Pen shell mollusk.

"I always walk on the sand bar at low tide," said Foshager, who is a physician up north and vacations on the islands.

"The poor bird was struggling to get away from the shell, but it was so heavy."

The unhappy tern was pulling the shell toward the water. Foshager stopped a beachgoer who had a little net, asking him if she could use it. She put the net over the tern's head, which calmed the bird down for a moment; she had seen a CROW volunteer do this during previous rescues.

The man held the tern's body while Foshager attempted to pry his leg out of the Pen shell's mouth. But the mollusk stubbornly kept his shell clamped down, not budging a centimeter. Moments later the man's wife arrived on the scene. "Could I borrow your towel to take this bird to CROW?" Foshager asked her. "I promise I will return it, if you tell me where you are staying."

"Sure," she said.

Foshager managed the awkward job of picking up the tern with one hand and holding up the heavy shell with the other; she knew the bird's reed-thin leg could snap in an instant in the shell's rigid jaws. She wondered how she would get the bird/shell combo up to CROW by herself. Just then her friend, Judy King, who had been out jogging that morning on the beach, came up beside her. King said she had seen her involved in the operation from a distance, and got the feeling she needed some help.

The two walked to her condo complex, and King ran in to their unit to grab the car keys. Foshager held the bird, who was agitated during the ride to the clinic, for obvious reasons.

At CROW, Dr. Amber McNamara took the bird back to the surgery room. By now the mollusk was just as unhappy as the bird and let go of his grip. The bird's leg, badly bleeding and fractured, slipped out. "It must have been clamped down on an artery, because blood was just pouring out," said McNamara.

CROW staff gave the Pen shell back to Foshager and King, asking them to take the dehydrated mollusk back to the Gulf. The two completed their morning adventure by putting the Pen shell in the water at the shoreline and returning the towel and net to their owners.

Meanwhile, at the clinic, the bird continued to bleed and was quite frantic. After giving pain medications, Dr. McNamara placed him under anesthesia to stabilize the fracture and stop the blood flow. The Chinese herb Yunan Paiyo helped stem the bleeding and a Telfa wrap provided support. Upon waking, staff put him in a cage in ICU with another Sandwich Tern who had been found on Sanibel the week before suffering from toxicosis.

"After meeting the other tern, this was a new bird," said McNamara. "He was happy to have a buddy. It took the anxiety away. The two spent most of the day sitting next to each other."

Dr. McNamara took the tern back to the surgery room on Day 3 to fashion a more durable brace for his fractured leg. "This time I put on a boot made up of Vetlite that would provide him with more support and allow him to bathe everyday," she said. "Actually, it was more like a sandal than a boot because it did not completely cover his toes."

Feasting on smelt and silver sides, both terns continued to improve, and on November 25 were transferred to an outdoor cage.

With his quick metabolism, the tern's fracture healed in short order, and he was able to fly and land without any trouble. CROW released both Sandwich Terns together on Sanibel Island on December 2.

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Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.

P.O. Box 150. Sanibel, FL 33957

(239) 395-0050

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