

WONDERFUL WADADLI!

By Martha Watkins Gilkes



The Stevie Wonder song “Signed, Sealed, Delivered” is a good description of this amazing animal story. It’s a rare occasion when we humans enter the world of wild animals and share their experiences. This story tells of such an occasion.

In the small hours of the morning on August 13th 2001, an exhausted baby hooded seal (*Cystophora cristata*) from icy Arctic waters, thousands of miles to the north of the Caribbean, found its way onto Runaway Beach on the western side of Antigua. This is the furthest south such an event has ever been recorded. His limp, nearly lifeless body was discovered, lying barely above the breaking tide, by a little boy fishing in the area. Word spread and onlookers soon gathered. Very few islanders had ever seen a seal. No one could believe a seal would be in the tropical waters around Antigua. Years ago the monk seal was found in the tropical waters of the Western

Atlantic, but these have been extinct since the 1950’s.

The event caused such a wave of interest that some of the onlookers remained by the seal’s side till dawn to be sure no one harmed him. By daybreak word was out; it seemed a celebrity had landed as crowds gathered to look at “Serenity”, the first name he was given. He was so named as some felt he was serene; in reality, he was too exhausted and dehydrated to move, except to slowly open and close his soft big brown watery eyes, which only further melted the hearts of the helpless onlookers. He was later to be re-named “Lucky” by a little boy, who felt the seal was lucky to be alive. However, in the end his name was changed to “Wadadli”, the original Indian name for Antigua. In addition to dehydration, he had been attacked by a shark, which added to his trauma.

I first heard about this baby seal at 6.00am on Monday on our radio show “Wake Up Caribbean”. A caller had commented that none of the onlookers knew what to do for the injured seal or how to approach or handle him. I immediately e-mailed the USA-based Marine Mammal Stranding Center (MMSC) for guidance. I had made contact with them in the

past and knew they could provide guidance. They advised of the strange phenomena of six hooded seals, a species of Arctic seal, being found in the Caribbean over the past three weeks and e-mailed a photograph for confirmation of the species of our seal. They had no explanation as to how this could happen; perhaps there had been some cold ocean currents that led the seals towards the south; perhaps young inexperienced seals became disoriented?

The MMSC stressed that it was important to know what kind of seal had arrived. Once established that, indeed, a baby Arctic hooded seal was on our shores, we were advised that the seal be immersed immediately in iced water as his body could not take the tropical temperatures. In addition, he had been eating sand to overcome starvation, and there was an urgent need to deal with this problem. We knew the seal did not belong in the tropics, nor did we have the facilities to care for him. The only hope of saving him was evacuation off island.

The MMSC offered to take Wadadli if he could be transported to New York. BWIA offered to fly the seal there, but the next flight was not for two days. I was then advised that a San Juan based Laboratory of Marine Mammals of the Caribbean had taken another stranded hooded seal found in St Barts. Its Director, Dr Antonio Mignucci-Giannoni agreed, once US government permissions could be obtained, to accept the seal for rehabilitation and release him back into the wild. LIAT agreed to fly Wadadli to San Juan, but there was no flight that day.

Meanwhile, volunteers on the beach dug a temporary trench, lined with plastic; ice was rushed to the scene. Antiguans turned out in force to offer help. Several umbrellas were erected to protect him from the noonday sun. Wadadli immediately began eating ice cubes and as his body temperature was lowered, he perked up slightly. Dr Tom Brown and Dr Fiona Francis offered veterinary services. The local ice plant, Ice Unlimited, offered to accept the seal as he needed to be removed from the hot beach to a quiet, cold shelter. The Antigua and Barbuda Coast Guard assumed responsibility; with military precision, Lt James began arrangements to move Wadadli.

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Eventually, Dr Mignucci indicated approval had been given for the seal to enter US territory and that permission had been granted from the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources in Puerto Rico (PR DNER) for the CSN to rehabilitate the seal.

To allow a PR DNER plane to fly to Antigua to rescue the seal, Lt James took charge in obtaining the needed permissions. At sunset, the plane arrived at VC Bird International Airport and Dr Mignucci and Dr Luis Figueroa rushed to the ice plant to provide emergency care.

All vital signs were checked. Wadadli needed emergency antibiotic injections. A procession of vehicles set off for the airport in caravan style, taking the seal to the waiting aircraft. The Piper Navaho piloted by Captain Jose Medina of the PR DNER was airborne for the two hour flight to Wadadli's new temporary home at the Caribbean Marine Mammal Laboratory in San Juan. Wadadli is now recovering from his traumatic journey. It is hoped that in time he will fully recover and can be released back to the wild to live out a happy life.

Wadadli had graced the cover of The Antigua Sun and The Daily Observer newspapers. A Sun editorial pointed out how he had brought out the warm side of the people of Antigua. Radio and television stations around the island carried his story. For those involved in the rescue, Wadadli will remain in our hearts for a long time. Thanks are due to all who played a part in this amazing story. The care shown by so many Antiguans for one tiny, helpless marine mammal indicates the increasing awareness of our environment and concern for all creatures great and small.

Scientists around the world participate in programmes to help study and rescue stranded, sick or injured marine mammals (dolphins, whales, manatees or seals). For more information on the Caribbean Stranding network, or to report a stranded marine mammal, please contact: Dr Antonio Mignucci-Giannoni, Caribbean Stranding Network, Puerto Rico, tel: (787) 766 1717 ext. 6600; e-mail mignucci@caribe.net, or check out the website at <http://rcv.caribe.net>.