

Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary

All life was precious to Dale Shields



PHOTO COURTESY OF PELICAN MAN'S BIRD SANCTUARY

Dale Shields, founder of the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary in Sarasota, seemed to have a gift for gaining the trust of his wild friends.

Fate grabbed Dale Shields by the lapels, drew him close, and looked him square in the eye. As is often the case when fate takes a hand in the lives of humans, the results were spectacular.

Known as the Pelican Man for more than two decades, Shields was founder of the Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary, today Florida's largest wildlife rescue and rehabilitation center. Located on a three-acre site adjacent to Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota, the sanctuary each year treats

4,000 to 7,000 injured wildlife, provides a home for more than 250 permanently disabled animals, and hosts more than 100,000 visitors.

On January 2, 2003, Dale Shields died of heart problems that could have done him in years earlier. But he was destined to live long enough to leave behind a legacy of wildlife conservation that includes saving more than 150,000 animals and awakening scores of people to the damage being done to the environment. His efforts did not go unnoticed. In 1990 he was honored as one of President George Bush's One Thousand

Points of Light.

Says Dr. Mona Schonbrunn, who worked as a volunteer at Shields's side for sixteen years and serves as sanctuary president, "Dale was a man with severe medical problems, no formal education, and no money. But there wasn't a negative bone in his body and he wasn't afraid of anything. He was a great salesman with a special gift, who had made a promise to God."

Salesman to Savior

After a career as a car salesman in Michigan, Shields moved to Florida in the

By Glenn V. Ostle

mid-1970s.

From an early age Shields had displayed an affinity for wild animals. He often told of an experience that had changed his life: While preparing for a hunt as a young man, he fell asleep in the woods and was awakened by a huge buck licking his face. As the two stared at one another, chills ran down his back. Shields sold all his gear and never hunted again.

In 1981 his connection with wildlife took a fateful turn when he found the half-dead pelican he later named George. After searching in vain for a place to rehabilitate the bird, Shields began to nurse George (who later turned out to be Georgette) with puréed fish using a turkey baster.

Although George's health improved, Shields suffered a massive heart attack. While in the hospital he had a vision of a wildlife sanctuary and promised God that if he lived, he would dedicate his life to saving pelicans and other wild animals.

Shields recovered and set out to learn how to help sick and injured wildlife. In 1982 he received state and federal rehabilitation licenses and in 1985 he opened the Pelican Man's Rehabilitation Center on a small site on Longboat Key. In 1988 the facility moved to its current three-acre location, leased from the City of Sarasota for \$1 per year.

Over the years Shields drew notice for his ability to relate to wildlife, pelicans in particular. According to Schonbrunn, wildlife not only recognized Shields's voice but also the sound of his car. "During rescue trips, volunteers would be amazed to see injured pelicans run straight into Dale's arms. Birds at the sanctuary would become excited and seemed to stand taller when he was around. He had a special gift, and he used it."

One for the Birds

The Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary is a well-tended complex with lush vegetation, meandering boardwalks and spacious pools. Donor names are etched everywhere—on bricks, boardwalks, and birdhouses.

To the casual visitor, the sanctuary appears to be only a bird-viewing area, but its mission is clear—to rescue, rehabilitate, and release wildlife. Although all sea- and shorebirds suffer the effects of fishhooks, pesticides, pollutants, and speeding boats, ninety percent of the pelicans that arrive there are injured by fishing line, which can

damage their wings, become lodged in their throats, or fatally entangle them in mangrove trees.

The sanctuary consists of several rehabilitation areas: a hospital, nursery, fifty permanent habitats, an aviary, and a huge flight cage, where birds relearn to fly.

Most surgery at the hospital involves removing fishing hooks and mending broken bones. More challenging surgical procedures have included repairing a broken mandible, amputating a toe, pinning a fractured bat bone, and suturing deep lacerations in a 150-pound white-tailed deer.

Each year, the sanctuary raises nearly 1,000 orphaned and injured baby birds, three-quarters of which are eventually returned to the wild. A small raptor nursery has one-way glass allowing visitors to see volunteers behind curtains using hand puppets to feed baby owls, which prevents the young birds from growing dependent on human handlers.

Although more than sixty percent of the rehabilitated animals return to the wild, some never do. The most heart-wrenching section of the sanctuary is the area reserved for more than 250 permanent residents, representing fifty-five different bird species. The animals will spend the rest of their lives in enclosed habitats.

Sanctuary Supporters

A woman dips her brush into an open can of white paint and intently begins to retouch the huge bill of a heron painted on the fence that surrounds the sanctuary. She is just one of three hundred volunteers who contribute more than 30,000 hours of service each year.

Volunteers also drive the sanctuary's four rescue trucks, which are on the road seven days a week, responding to calls within a four-county, fifty-mile radius. Each year, the rescue team logs more than 150,000 miles to respond to 6,000 distress calls and to rescue about 5,000 birds and animals.

The nonprofit organization receives no federal or state money. Its million-dollar annual operating budget comes from contributions and donations from individuals, corporations, and foundations, supplemented by income from two local Pelican Man thrift stores.

According to Schonbrunn, "Dale suffered many heart attacks, but we knew he would not go unless he felt that the sanctuary could survive without him. He had two

wishes; one was for a new hospital and the other for an endowment program. We are working to make both wishes come true."

The Pelican Man's efforts and selfless dedication have helped thousands of animals and given many people a sense of responsibility to prevent and undo damage that humans inflict upon wildlife.

"I started here as a volunteer in 1986 and never left. Dale inspired me, as he did many others, with his vision and commitment. Some people say I now have big shoes to fill. But I prefer to think that my job is to keep Dale's shoes well polished so that they continue to shine brightly," says Schonbrunn.

"He was a great salesman. Who else could have sold the world on pelicans?"

The Pelican Man's Bird Sanctuary is in Ken Thompson Park on City Island in Sarasota, Florida (adjacent to Mote Marine Laboratory). For more information, call 941/388-4444 or visit the Web site at www.pelicanman.org.

Glenn Ostle is a freelance writer and photographer, avid traveler, and a lover of wild places and the creatures that live in them.

PROTECT A PELICAN

- Nine out of ten pelicans injured are hurt as a result of fishing line.
- People should never feed pelicans. Fish can get lodged in a bird's throat and choke it. And if a young pelican is fed, it will not migrate.
- If you accidentally hook a pelican or other bird while fishing, don't cut the line. Reel the bird in slowly and use a landing net to lift him carefully. Grasp the bird's bill and restrain the animal with wings folded against the body. If alone, wrap the bird in a towel or large cloth. Push the hook's barb through the skin, cut off the barb, and then back out the hook. If the bird has swallowed the hook or is seriously injured, take it to a wildlife rehabilitation center. Locally, the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife is on Sanibel, 239/472-3644; the Conservancy of Southwest Florida is in Naples, 239/262-2273. (Please see related story on page 36.)