



Conservation

‘Willie’, the red-footed booby that touched the lives of many

A true friend and companion can take many forms. This is the story of one such friend that touched the hearts of those who had the pleasure of meeting her during her three years on Alphonse Island. Aurelie Duhec, a conservation officer with the Island Conservation Society (ICS), recounts her story of an unlikely encounter that left fond memories and a few important lessons in the process

CONTRIBUTED BY AURELIE DUHEC, ICS



A very special bond: Willie with benefactor Aurelie.

Assisted by my colleague Richard, I took care of this injured bird since 11 May 2011, the day we found her seriously injured with blood covering her feathers. I could not pass by and let this creature die in pain and misery so Richard and I did our best to cure the juvenile creature so as to facilitate its rehabilitation into the wild. Unfortunately, we were too optimistic and her bones were too badly broken to be completely repaired, leaving her unable to fly.

For two and half years we took great care of Willie. She was a beautiful red-footed booby - with pink eyes that were surrounded by a beautiful set of blue eyelids. I am pretty sure Willie was a female. There is no sexual dimorphism in red-footed boobies except that females are heavier than males: around 1kg for the female and 800g for males. Bird experts hypothesise that size dimorphism is an adaptive consequence of their different roles, females spending time to brood while males are at sea to harvest fish.

Despite having lost her capacity to fly, Willie lived in total freedom on the island. She walked around confidently, and set herself flight training sessions on the beach. She loved to climb on our bikes for a ride and sometimes stayed for hours at sea as she was a confident swimmer and loved the water. I believe she was a happy

bird with a wonderful personality and fighting spirit.

Since the rescue, Willie became increasingly attached to me. I was amazed to observe how she let me tend to her injuries without a fuss during her convalescence; she was calm, but always kept an eye on me as I tended to her wound and observed what I was doing to cure her. Over time she came to appreciate affection and would often come to me for a cuddle, nestling her head on my shoulder and at times falling asleep with me. Everyone knew Willie on the island and she was very much part of the Island’s team in our daily lives.

I left Alphonse in January of this year as I had to undertake another outer island experience with the ICS on Farquhar. Willie was well taken care of since I left Alphonse, but she unfortunately began to experience trouble with eating and most recently refused to eat for several days - which caused her demise shortly after. My colleagues investigated the cause of death, which could have been a host of factors, such as fish bones, poisons, maybe even the consumption of plastics.

I am saddened to lose Willie as is the case with the whole ICS team. I do believe however that in death, Willie has regained her ability to fly and is now flying high above us. A real release for special bird, that I will always call my friend....



Despite the fact that Willie could not fly, she remained independent.

A rescued red-footed booby (a sea bird), which I adopted and considered a close friend, passed away on 10 September 2014 on Alphonse Island. This rescued bird had revealed herself to be an important island protagonist by enhancing the ecotourism activities of the ICS team on the Island. Willie was well known to the regulars at the Alphonse Island Lodge

and was shown affection and care by the entire island’s staff. Willie became something of a legend on Alphonse, and she will be missed by all islanders - and me in particular. Losing Willie compelled me to share the story of this wonderful bird so she will never be forgotten and that more people can hopefully understand the special bond that humans and wildlife can share.



Who would have thought that birds could interact with humans in that way?



A very special bond indeed.

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