Please enjoy this fascinating and informative interview with Mickey Zucker, bird rescue expert who volunteers at Seaside Seabird Sanctuary at 18328 Gulf Blvd. Indian Shores.

1. **What do you like most about your rescuing and caring for birds?**

I have been an animal lover pretty much since birth. My mother used to tell the story of me hearing that the earthworms that came out during rainstorms usually died because they couldn't get back to the soil before the sun dried up the puddles on the sidewalks and roads and dehydrated the worms. Even before I could walk, I used to crawl outside to throw the worms back into the grass so they wouldn't die. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a veterinarian. I used to train all the neighborhood animals. All my birthday parties as a child were held at the zoo. I always wanted to work with animals, but the thought of having to euthanize them pushed me into human medicine instead. I hate the idea of animals suffering, so when I retired and found I had the time, I started volunteering at Seaside. Florida has the most amazing array of birds, and I discovered I liked working with them best. Every rescue is different and challenging in its own way. It is a great way to stimulate the mind, keep the body active and save our beloved birds who would otherwise be disabled and/or die, often horribly. I also enjoy meeting so many people who feel as passionate about our wildlife as I do. The people who call for help do so because they care, and I am so glad we have so many wonderful people in our community.

2. What are some of the common causes for birds needing rescue or medical help?

The most common cause is fishing line entanglements and hooks. This is particularly sad because it is mostly avoidable or immediately fixable. I cast net, and a lot of my friends and family are fishermen, so I have nothing against the sport. In fact, many of our volunteers and staunchest supporters are fishermen. A good start is to police your fishing area and make certain no line or hooks are left behind. Another is to know what to do if you hook a bird. NEVER CUT THE LINE! This is the deadliest thing for the birds because the extra line tends to either cut off the blood supply to various parts of the body or enwrap the legs or wings, causing them to be unable to fly and/or walk. Often, the line becomes tangled

around a stationary object, such as a tree limb, hanging, strangling or simply starving the animal. Instead, slowly reel the bird in. If you do not feel comfortable handling the bird, call a rescue organization such as Seaside Seabird Sanctuary, Owl's Nest Sanctuary for Wildlife or Birds in Helping Hands. If you do feel comfortable, make sure you have control of the bird's head to protect yourself. With a pelican, make sure you are not holding the beak completely closed, as they breathe through their mouths and can suffocate. We put an index finger inside the beak and clamp it closed against our finger with the thumb and middle finger. You could also just put a towel over the head. Other birds, you can gently hold the beak closed (beaks are fragile) or hold by the back of the head. Or, again, put a towel over. To remove a hook, it is best to push the barbed end through and clip off the barb before backing the hook out. Be sure all of the line is cut or disentangled from the bird before releasing. If the bird is injured in any way, it is always best to call for a rescue. If you have any concerns at all, call us or one of the other wildlife rescues. Nobody is going to get mad at you for accidentally hooking or tangling a bird, and it is safer for you and the bird to call.

Another common, preventable cause is secondary poisoning from rodenticides. This is mostly in raptors, such as hawks, osprey, owls and eagles. People put out rodent boxes, the mice and rats are poisoned but take time to die, and the birds eat them (or feed to young) and are poisoned. This is entirely preventable because raptors do a much better job of killing the rats and mice (thus the boxes are unnecessary). Also, there are rodenticides that don't cause secondary poisoning. If you need to use a rodenticide, please choose one that doesn't cause secondary poisonings of some of our most beautiful and regal birds.

Toxicities of other types, such as from pesticides and herbicides are common. Again, choosing ones that are wildlife friendly is simple and best. Other toxicities, such as illnesses or red tide are not preventable but are treatable.

Other common causes: car strikes (again, often preventable), other vehicle strikes such as bicycles and golf carts (nearly always preventable), propellor boat strikes, falling out of nests, trees cut down with nests in them, fabric or plastic stuck on beaks or legs, bites or stabs from other animals (fights or escape from predators such as sharks, alligators, coyotes, cats, dogs, and turtles), accidental falls into water, failure to thrive for younger birds, starvation from habitat loss, and, unfortunately, deliberate cruelty.

3. What supplies do you take with you when you respond to bird calls?

The most common supplies used are nets of various types (hand, cast, bow, and even butterfly) and various sized crates. That is the basics. Gloves are also important, especially for mammals and raptors. We always have a lot of towels, mostly for lining and covering crates, clean up, etc. I find a good pair of binoculars invaluable.

My car is so full of equipment, I can't fit any passengers! My family knows me so well, I got a telescoping ladder for a Mother's Day present, and I use it a lot. Bait of various types is also important. I always have a cooler of fish, a bucket of corn, cat food, and bird seed. I have a few hook cutters, a head lamp for rescues in dark places, several types of scissors, hand sanitizer, crate sanitizer, and first aid supplies both for rescuers and the animals. We often need kayaks and other watercraft. I keep a gallon of water in the car and buckets of various kinds. Also, plastic bags, especially garbage bags.

In spring and early summer, I carry nest boxes for renesting various sizes of birds that live inside of trees (mostly woodpeckers, owls and kestrels). I also have plastic containers and baskets of useful shapes and sizes for renesting birds that live in nests built on branches or in niches of buildings. I also carry a drill/driver and screws for putting up the nesting boxes and paracord for putting up the plastic and basket artificial nests. A bag of hay and/or pine needles works for nesting material.

I am sure I am forgetting things, but those cover most situations.

4. You told me baby birds often fall out of a nest. if a person witnesses this or sees what looks like an abandoned baby bird, what should they do?

The first thing to do is figure out if the bird is injured. If it is, it needs to go to a qualified rehab facility, such as Seaside Seabird Sanctuary. If you are unsure, you can call us at 727-391-6211.

If no injuries are seen, look to see if the eyes are open. If not, it is a hatchling. The next step is to look for a nest. If you find one, put the baby back in the nest, if

possible. If not, you can make an artificial nest from a plastic container with holes punched in the bottom for drainage or a basket. Do not use cardboard, paper, or anything else that cannot handle rain. Put the nest up as high as you possibly can in the nearest tree and put the baby in it. Do not worry about touching it. It is a myth that birds will not take babies back if they smell that humans have touched it. Birds are usually excellent parents, and their sense of smell is generally poor.

If the eyes are open, look to see if it is well-feathered with a short tail and wings but can walk, hop or flutter or if the feathers are few and in tube-like sheaths. If few or no feathers, it is a nestling. Once again, look for a nest and put it back in or make an artificial one.

If it IS well-feathered with a short tail and wings and walks, hops and/or flutters, it is a fledgling. Fledglings rarely need human intervention. They have attempted to fly from the nest and will do so again if returned to it. Parent birds will continue to feed them on the ground and teach them to hide and to fly. If it is in immediate danger (such as being on a road or sidewalk), put it on a nearby shrub or bush and leave the area.

No matter the age of the baby, please do not attempt to feed it and, especially, do not force water or other liquids. This can result in aspiration and death. Parents locate the baby by sound, and the baby is going to squawk more if it is hungry. The parents will do a better job of feeding than we can.

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to call Seaside Seabird Sanctuary or another licensed bird rescue.

5. How can people help protect wild birds?

Many ways. Most of the wildlife sanctuaries operate solely on donations, so those are always appreciated. Volunteering time or wish list items is also a great way to assist. It is illegal in the state of Florida to harass wildlife of any kind. If you see someone chasing or throwing things at the wild birds, please speak up! People do not always listen, but if enough people say something, it will help.

Confine tree trimming to August through November whenever possible to avoid destroying nests. Pick up trash wherever you see it, especially fishing line and

hooks, strings, balloons, plastic objects, and anything made of fabric. Obviously, do not litter. DO NOT release balloons, especially with strings attached. Do not tell kids that they will "fly to heaven." Balloons are a huge cause of damage and death to birds. If you see an injured bird, call a licensed rescue or sanctuary.

Allow birds to perch on your decks, docks, yards and balconies. Remember that they were here first, and as we have stolen most of their habitat, we need to learn to be good neighbors and share our properties with the wildlife. They have nowhere else to go. Any mess they leave is biodegradable, and they will help rid your yard of pests, including insects and rodents.

Confine cats to indoors. Neutering and spaying is not enough. One cat can kill hundreds of birds, even if it is well-fed. It is also unsafe for the cat, as cats are the favorite food of most alligators and coyotes. Watch your dogs. It is not cute or fun to watch them chase squirrels and birds. Keep them leashed; it is the law. And, please, please, please obey the signs. There is very little room left for our precious (and often unique) Florida birds. Nature preserves are pet-free for a reason. Let the wildlife have their few remaining safe spaces.

6. What are the best practices for people who encounter a bird in distress?

In general, the best thing to do is to call Seaside Seabird Sanctuary (727-391-6211) or another licensed rescue, then remain where you can safely and non-threateningly watch the bird until a rescuer arrives.

Be sure to answer your phone, as our rescuers use their own cell phones to contact you, and they often have non-727 numbers. If you call more than one rescue, please call off the others as soon as you are notified that someone is coming. Also let them all know if the bird flies away or passes away. Remember that our rescuers are all volunteers and if you have seven different rescuers from seven different rescues coming, no one is available to help other birds. Also, they may use up hours of time and gas, which is quite expensive and very upsetting.

If the bird is not able to fly, and it is not a large bird or one with a potentially dangerous beak, you can gently wrap it in a towel, put it in a box or crate and transport it to Seaside Seabird Sanctuary (or another wildlife rehab facility). Otherwise, it is best to call and keep eyes on or recruit someone nearby to keep

eyes on. If you recruit someone else, be sure to give them the phone number for the rescuer who is on the way.

If the bird is in a dangerous location, such as the middle of the road or drowning in a pool, please either gently herd it to a safer location, pull it out of the water, or move it. If you grab hold of the bird, keep hold or contain it until help can arrive.

Please do not attempt to catch a flighted bird. The chances of catching it without specialized equipment is slim, and the more a bird is chased the more likely it will fly away or become so wary it is nearly impossible to catch. No one is fast enough to throw a towel or sheet over a flighted bird. Please don't try.

If the bird is tethered to something (such as a tree or bush), and you do not have hook cutters and scissors or the ability to hold onto the bird while all the line is completely removed, please leave it tethered. Too often, well-meaning people cut the line that is tying a bird to a stationary object, only to have the bird immediately fly away or run to an unreachable place with hook and line still attached, where it again becomes tethered, but no one is there to see it, or it is somewhere no one can get to it.

Remember that wildlife rescuers are experienced and trained in how to handle birds. Know that birds will almost always attempt to escape, in any way possible. **They do not know you are trying to help them; they believe you are trying to eat them!!** Rescue shows on television only show you the successes, and the rescuers are usually VERY experienced. If you attempt to catch a bird and miss, you will make it much more difficult or impossible for the rescuer to do what needs doing. That is not good for the bird, and it is a waste of everyone's time. If you do catch it, the bird will attempt to defend itself. More than once, I have cautioned a caller not to touch the bird, only to arrive to a bloody and contrite caller and a missing bird. Please, please be careful!

7. What is the best course of action if someone sees a pelican or other water bird entangled with fishing line or a hook/line hanging from its body?

If the bird is caught on a fishing pole, I have already answered this. In any other situation, it is best to call Seaside Seabird Sanctuary (or other wildlife rescue organization), then retreat to a non-threatening (to the bird) and safe (for you) location to keep eyes on the bird until a member of the rescue team arrives. The only times it is better to intervene is if the bird is in a life-threatening situation, such as close to or in the middle of a street, drowning, or if the entanglement interferes with breathing. Once a bird is captured, unless all of the hooks and line are removed and there are no significant residual injuries, it should be contained and taken to the sanctuary or, if that is not possible, held in place until help arrives. When in doubt, it is always better to bring the bird in. It is easier to release than to recapture.

Most birds with hooks and/or line are still flighted, and those are extremely difficult to catch without special training and/or equipment. Even if the bird is catchable, it needs to be safely held until all the hooks and lines are removed.

Unfortunately, it is common for people to make good faith attempts to catch the bird and either cause it to fly or swim away or make it so wary it becomes impossible or nearly impossible to catch. Even when the bird is caught, it is common for people to leave hooks or partial line either because they lack proper equipment, the bird escapes their grasp or the bird bites, wing slaps, or claws them, causing them to release it prematurely. Pelicans have been suffocated when people hold their beaks fully closed. It is also common for the birds to be injured in the process or removing hooks (the barb(s) must be clipped off before removal) and lines because people lack the training to do so safely.

8. What parts of Clearwater have you been called to help with an injured bird?

I have been called to every part of Clearwater. On average, there are more calls to Clearwater Beach than other parts, but there is no part of Clearwater that is not covered by Seaside Seabird Sanctuary.

9. We have peacocks near Moccasin Lake. Have there ever been any calls involving peacocks?

I can't personally recall any peacock calls to Moccasin Lake. However, I have done at least a dozen peacock rescues, mostly for Birds in Helping Hands, a prolific

wildlife rescue organization. Just last week, I rescued a peahen with chicks that had gotten fishing line embedded in its leg in the sacred area of Jungle Prada.

10. How many and what types of birds do you have at the sanctuary?

Seaside Seabird Sanctuary rehabilitates birds of almost every kind. Although not currently accepting waterfowl (ducks, geese and similar) due to the risk of avian influenza, patients include everything from warblers and other songbirds to bald eagles and other raptors to great blue herons and most things in between. Dispatch receives more than 10,000, and the volunteer rescuers (like me) bring in 3000-3500 sick patients for admission per year. There are also about 150 permanent residents, birds that cannot be released to the wild and are kept on the premises to be enjoyed by staff and visitors. Our animal ambassadors are taken by our bird handlers to many special events. Admission is free, as is parking. Seaside is open 365 days per year for visitation and rescues, from 8 am to 4 pm (visitation). Rescue is 8 am to 8 pm, plus there is a night building for after-hours drop offs. A 501(c)3, it operates and is dependent on donations.

11. What do wild birds eat, and do they eat those same things at the sanctuary?

Bird diets vary immensely depending on the type of bird. Our rehabbers and hospital volunteers do their best to match the diet of the birds in the wild. Eating is very important to healing, so everything is done to encourage a healthy appetite and make for an easy transition from the wild to the hospital, then the rehabilitation pens, and back into the wild.

12. Do you think the birds you work with know they are being rescued/helped?

Occasionally, a bird will actually go to humans to assist. Years ago, there was a pelican who would visit the sanctuary whenever he had a hook stuck in him for removal. This is rare, however. Usually, the birds think we are trying to eat them and act accordingly.

13. Do the birds at the sanctuary have names and distinct personalities?

While birds of the same breed do have general personality types, they definitely have individual personalities. We do not name the ones who come in for hospital

care with the goal of release. We try to keep those birds as unaccustomed to humans as their treatment allows. When it comes to our permanent residents, those all have names and very distinct personalities. For example, we have a screech owl named Rufous who is very mellow and is taken to nearly every event. He is great for training the new bird handling volunteers. Cypress is a barn owl who is frequently borrowed by other rescue groups because of her exquisite beauty and calm disposition, unusual for her breed.

14. The Seaside Seabird Sanctuary states: "Out of the 3000-3500 sick and injured wild birds that are admitted into the Sanctuary's hospital each year, 51% of the birds are successfully treated and rehabilitated. Seaside's success rate is just above the national average, which is only 39%. What do you think accounts for your very high success rate?

I honestly believe that Seaside's rehab team is exceptionally educated, dedicated and talented. The head rehabber, Melissa, is the best bird rehabber on the planet in my opinion. We also have a wonderful veterinarian in Dr. Zelner, who donates her very valuable time and supplies, when needed. Remember, too, that that number only includes the birds which are brought in, which are the more critical cases. The birds that can be treated in the field (usually foreign body removals such as hooks and lines, birds taken out of stores and pool enclosures, water rescues, renests and birds with minor injuries) are released without ever being admitted. Rescue organizations, and even other rehabs, often send their most difficult cases, so, if anything, the number underestimates the competence and quality of Seaside's rehabbers.

15. What's the drop off box?

I am assuming you are referring to the night drop off area, which contains crates, pens, clothespins and cards so people can drop off sick or injured birds after hours. Seaside's official hours are 8 am to 4 pm every day (including weekends and holidays), which is when the gates are open. The rescue hours are 8 am to 8 pm. However, there is staff on site 24/7, and the night drop is checked regularly. The pens and cards are for leaving information with the birds. The more complete the information, the better, especially addresses and phone numbers for future

release or renesting. There is also a box for item donation drop offs. The Facebook site lists the many items that Seaside is in need of or can use.

16. How is the Seaside Seabird Sanctuary funded and staffed?

Seaside Seabird Sanctuary is a 501(c)3 charity. It operates 100% on donations. Birds do not have hospital insurance, and it can be very expensive to provide the quality of care that Seaside does. All donations are greatly appreciated. As far as staffing, the vast majority of the people working there are volunteers (including myself). There are also a few paid staff members, although nearly all make only minimum wage. We can always use more volunteers in almost every capacity.

17. At the July Edgewater Neighborhood Association meeting, members of that group constructed 12 large birdhouses and donated them to your sanctuary. Is the Sanctuary in need of more birdhouses, and where are they used?

The birdhouses are used by our rescue team to renest birds that live inside of trees, rather than in nests on branches. These include screech owls, barred owls, kestrels, downy woodpeckers, redbelly woodpeckers, pileated woodpeckers, wood ducks, and a few other types of birds. For years, my husband would throw together boxes for me as I needed them, but this took a lot of time, which I rarely had. I often had to reuse boxes, very difficult as callers lost interest in getting back to me after the box was no longer needed. Also, these types of birds tend to use the same nests year after year, and it seemed wrong to take them down when the birds might be returning the following year. I kept asking people if they could build boxes for me, and I got a lot of promises, but no one came through until Rick finally did, about two years after I initially asked him. Dane was the one who actually built the boxes, and he did a magnificent job. I could not have been more excited or happier to see and accept them. Thank you all so very much!!

Currently, we are in good shape for nesting boxes. Shortly after Rick invited Seaside's representatives to the meeting, one of the staff at Seaside was able to construct, with the help of her boyfriend, twelve screech owl nests. And just this week, a man named Mitch constructed eight beautiful screech owl nest boxes with his grandchildren as a special "camp" project. The nesting season is nearly over, so the need for birdhouses has declined exponentially. I believe we currently have enough for the 2024 season, especially screech owl sized, but

there will be more need in the future. I don't think we have any barred owl boxes at present, but it is not often that we need to renest barred owls.

The most common reason for needing these nesting boxes is because a tree trimmer cut down the tree, or part of the tree, with the nest inside. Sometimes all or some of the babies are killed, but other times they can be rescued and renested. Sometimes, the tree collapses because it is dead or because of a major weather event. The best way to help prevent this from happening is to limit significant tree trimming to August through January.

18. Anything else you think we should know?

Your questions were very thorough. The only things I can think of are my own wish list regarding rescues:

1. If more than one rescue organization is called, please call back and cancel any other rescue teams after the first one answers. We are all volunteers, and we are all overworked and do not get enough time for our personal lives. When multiple rescuers go to one rescue, other rescues are not covered and it is a huge waste of time and gas. Also call back if the bird dies or flies away.

2. No matter which rescue organization responds, they all tell callers that a rescuer will be calling them. We use our own personal phones, and many of the numbers are ported (not 727). Please answer our calls. Sometimes we are driving 30-40 minutes each way to help you. We may need information or directions or parking information or just be reassured that the bird still needs our assistance. Some organizations or rescuers will not go if they do not get an answer to their phone calls.

3. If possible, please stay and keep eyes on the bird. If you can't, see if someone else in the area can and give them the number of the rescuer or rescue organization. If rescuer on the way, tell the new watcher to call them.

4. If you call us, please do not attempt to rescue the bird yourself, but do keep eyes on.

5. Do not be offended if we do not take advice on rescue details. Television shows make animals rescues appear safe and easy or give wrong ideas. Bird rescues are very different from mammal rescues, and there is no replacement for experience. I am always willing to listen, but may not do what is suggested because, after a few thousand rescues, I have specialized knowledge..

6. Remember that rescuers have to buy their own rescue gear and bait. If something accidentally gets left behind, please call and let us know. We may not be able to afford a replacement.

Hope these answers were helpful. Thanks for asking.