

Rocky Raccoon: When rescue is a family affair

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Growing up — first in his car seat, then a booster, and then as a regular passenger — Willoughby, my son, watched us do it countless times and, as he got older, participated. By the time he was in the driver's seat, he was already an accomplished rescuer like his older sister. So when he bought his first car, I gave him a gift to make it easier — an animal rescue kit.



It happens often — seeing phantom animals along the roadside that require a closer look. “What was that?” one of us will ask. And we always go back and check. Most of the time, the phantom turns out to be nothing — a shoe, a crumpled bit of paper, or a piece of garbage — and we can go back about our business, grateful and relieved. Sometimes, however, it *is* an animal — an injured pigeon, a lost dog, a sick cat.

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So when he bought his first car, I gave him a gift to make it easier — an animal rescue kit. The kit included a collapsible pet carrier, bite-proof animal handling gloves, a leash, tongs, cat food, a water/food bowl, a blanket, towels, baby wipes, and trash bags. He has put the kit to good use.



After one particular rescue, however, Will forgot to put the carrier back in the car. So when he and his girlfriend did the “double-check” last week and found a wobbly raccoon in the ivy abutting the freeway, he pulled over and, needing backup, called me.

The raccoon was barely moving but trying to drink from a little puddle of water in the gutter. My son approached, careful not to frighten him into oncoming traffic. Rocky did not retreat. In fact, he could barely stand. It seemed his leg was broken, and he was thirsty, exacerbated by the fact that our area was in the grip of a heat dome, with temperatures in the mid-90s.



My wife and I drove to his location, where Will and I caught the raccoon using the blanket, towels, and carrier we kept in our car.



It was late on the 4th of July, and all the rehabilitation centers were closed. The only wildlife emergency hospital open at the time was *not* one we trusted. My son had once found a pigeon moving slowly and dragging a wing. My wife and I drove Hector to this particular hospital. They told us that if they admitted him and he could not fly, they would not return him to us even though we offered to care for him for life, along with our other two rescued pigeons. They would kill him. We refused and treated him ourselves.

When Hector was fully healed, Willoughby released him back to his flock.



Not wanting to gamble with Rocky's life, we gave him some water, which he drank, and some cat food, which he ate, and then he quickly fell asleep. In the morning, my daughter drove him to a wildlife rehabilitation hospital in another county — one that would try to help him. Like “shelters,” too many “rehabbers” find killing easier than treating animals. We wanted to take him to one that would give him a fighting chance.

Unfortunately, he did not survive. Rocky had trauma consistent with being hit by a car, and by the time we found him, his injuries and his infection were too far along. But they tried for two days, and they assured us he was kept pain-free, clean, and comfortable. In rescue, sometimes there isn't a happy ending.

But there is solace.

First, another driver also stopped to render assistance, which happens more often than not these days. When we started in rescue decades ago, we were always the *only* people who stopped. While we were catching Rocky, she opened a colorful umbrella, so other drivers would see us, slow down, and give us a wide berth, given how close we were to traffic. After exchanging information, she texted numerous times to get updates about Rocky's progress. From her perspective, seeing an entire family trying to help an injured raccoon must have been tonic for the soul, too.

Second, and more importantly, Rocky did not die hungry, thirsty, painful, and alone. In the end, he experienced — and I like to believe, *recognized*— what Shakespeare called “the milk of human kindness.”

I take comfort in that.