

# **HEALING TOUCH- 2 CASE STUDIES OF FRACTURES**

**DR SARAH BRETT**

Introduction

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In my 28 years as a practicing veterinary surgeon I have treated a huge variety of wildlife patients, but, as we have all experienced, there are some patients that really touch your heart. I feel very honoured to be able to share 2 of those cases. The first is Mr P.

Mr P was, of course, a pelican. One Saturday afternoon I was feeding the resident patients at the Kimberley Vet Centre, in Kununurra WA, when a tourist contacted me via our Kimberley Wildlife Rescue number to say that he had just spotted a pelican tangled in fishing line in the, yes, crocodile infested Lower Ord River. Oh goody.

The beauty of a small town is that after a phone call to a mate with the local marine business, he had found someone with a boat to take me out on the rescue mission. We launched the boat into the lower Ord and found our patient without too much difficulty I was given a stern chat to remind me that I was NOT to get out of the boat as a very large salty was regularly seen in that area. I think Mick my trusty skipper had visions of me leaping out of the boat in the heat of the rescue!

As we slowly drew closer to Mr P, as he would be known from that moment on, the full horror of the situation was revealed. He was not tangled in fishing line, but had been caught, had his gulag (neck pouch) cut, and he had been tied around his beak and through the cut with 30lb line. He had then been tied to a dead tree in the middle of the river, as croc bait, I have no doubt.

I was instantly horrified, devastated and furious in equal measure, and my tummy was in a million knots. I gently caught Mr P, whilst leaning out of the boat praying for a croc not to take him at that very moment, whilst my mate cut the line and freed him. I must confess that I then had a quiet cry as I wrapped him up in a towel and gently

cuddled him in the bottom of the boat. Some days I am so ashamed to be a human.

Mr P and I travelled home in the boat whilst it was on the trailer, as I really didn't fancy cleaning pelican poop out of my rescuers very flash car. We were safely delivered to the clinic where my trembling friend was given pain relief, antibiotics, homeopathic trauma remedies, and had his wound cleaned and treated before he was installed in a small enclosure.

His wound was already very bruised, which progressed significantly over the next few days, but mercifully he had no other injuries. My right hand woman Desanka and I continued to treat him daily during his time with us, which was for some months, and eventually he accepted us as friends and carers. The first few days when we had to catch him was so distressing though, for him and for us. His little knees would literally knock and his legs tremble when we approached him, and every day we apologised to him for the evil members of the human race.

We made many phone calls and did as much research as we could about the healing abilities of gulags, and of course very little was known. Luckily I had had a previous pelican patient so was not fooled by the fact that their bodies feel like bubble wrap, as I was with my first patient. That had been a real education. We eventually opted to give him time to see what would happen before we operated, which turned out to be a great decision.

Mr P was a total trooper. Within days he had accepted us as a food source, and we moved him into a large aviary with a paddling pool and lots of privacy. As anyone who has had a pelican in care will know, these dudes eat a LOT. We recruited all our fishing friends to bring us live bait and any spare fish they could, and as always they responded very generously. A few wives even secretly donated their husbands bait stashes that they were very happy to get out of the freezer!

Mr P adjusted his "fishing" technique remarkably quickly, swallowing with his head tilted to the side. If he forgot, his fish shot out of the

hole in his gulag and he wondered where they had gone to. It was one of those situations which was incredibly comic and totally heartbreaking all at the same time.

Each day we dressed his wound with Dermaclens, which anyone who has heard me speak before will know is one of my favoured wound treatments. Its combination of mild acids in an oily base is very effective at removing dead cells from wounds and leaving the live cells healthy and intact. We use it on dogs, horses, wildlife and people. Over the following weeks more skin slowly died from the area where the circulation had been cut off by the fishing line, but the size of the wound slowly reduced as the very mobile skin contracted as a part of the healing process.

We only used antibiotics for the first week, but continued to use our homeopathic remedies in his pool every day. It was a true joy to see him heal, and a great tribute to creatures' ability to forgive human beings, when he so readily allowed us to treat and care for him.

Sadly I was away when the time came for Mr P to be released, but Desanka and friends took him down the Lower Ord to a beautiful part of the river at the back of one of our carers property. He was given a big chat about staying away from people in general, advice I think he would have heeded after his ugly experience.

The truly wonderful end to his story was that he was seen in that part of the river for quite some months, accompanied by a new friend! Mr P will always be one of our truly special cases. Writing about him, and re reading his story still brings a tear to my eye.



## **Mack the Wedgetailed Eagle**

Kimberley Wildlife Rescue Inc (KWR) in Kununurra, WA receives patients from Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing to the south of us, from Wyndham to the north of us and even from across the border in the Northern Territory. KWR is based at the Kimberley Vet Centre where we receive and treat our patients before they are then cared for by our staff, or sent to one of our network of carers.

At one of our weekly vet clinics in Wyndham, our Registered Vet Nurse (and legend) Desanka, was presented with Mack the Wedge tailed Eagle. It would be an understatement to say that on any given day we never know what we are going to be presented with, and on this particular day Desanka was expecting sick puppies. Instead she got a very large cardboard box full of Wedgie.

Mack was so christened because he was found after having accidentally hitched a ride on the front of a Mack truck. He could have hitched his ride anywhere between Argyle Diamond Mine and the Wyndham Port, and he became hooked under the bug deflector on the front of the truck by his right leg. I don't really know whether you call that lucky or unlucky!

The truckies that found him unhooked his leg and got him into a long packing box, and took him straight to our Wyndham clinic. Luckily for all of us it was the one day of the week that we were there. Desanka gave him pain relief and homeopathic remedies whilst he was lying down in his box, and brought him home with her to Kununurra which is 100kms away.

I think one of the reasons Mack healed as well as he did was because we were able to treat him straight after he was taken from the truck. He didn't have time for his wound to be contaminated, or his leg suffer further damage from being on the ground or trying to perch with a useless leg.

As soon as Desanka returned to the clinic with Mack, we anaesthetised him with Isoflurane gas and examined him. He appeared to be an adult in about his 3rd year and weighed 2.6kgs. He was in beautiful body condition, except for the broken leg of course, with magnificent plumage. We could find no other injuries than his broken leg, which was most encouraging.

His right leg was fractured in the tibial area, which was bruised, completely wobbly and slightly swollen. Luckily the leg had only a few very small wounds in the skin over the fracture area, as compound (open) wounds in birds are always hard to manage. His foot was slightly colder than that of his non injured leg, but with birds it is somewhat difficult to initially assess how effective their circulation is below a fracture.

We took x-rays of his legs, cleaned his wounds, gave him antibiotics and more homeopathic remedies to treat shock, trauma and bruising, and bandaged his leg. Of course we didn't remember to take any

pictures at the start, which was a major bummer, we were too busy just trying to get the job done.

His open wounds were covered with DermacLens, and we padded the leg with Softban (a cotton wool type padding) then supported it with a crepe bandage and then Elastoplast. We aligned the leg as well as we could by applying traction to the foot to bring it into as natural a position as possible. We left his foot completely out of the bandage, so that we could assess its movement, sensation and circulation and to see if he could use it to stand.

We recovered Mack in one of our small 1m x 1m cages and left him to gather his wits. We had only just finished our recovery cuppas when Mack was standing and already starting to place his foot. We knew that we had a really long way to go from here, but we were thrilled to see him using his foot, even if only a little.

At this point we had a number of things that concerned us. We planned to stabilise Mack over the next few days, and get him feeding and comfortable. Our first concern was to closely watch his foot for signs of it becoming cold or blue, indicating that the circulation was damaged. Death of the foot would mean that Mack would not have been able to survive.

Our second concern was what level of damage the nerve supply to his leg had suffered. This would determine what usage he would regain of his leg, as much as how well his complicated fracture was going to repair. Mack had been trapped by his leg for an unknown period of time, though we thought that it was most likely that it had been for about 40 or 50kms. The longer he had been trapped the greater likelihood his leg had sustained damage to the blood and /or nerve supply.

Partial damage to the blood supply could mean a reduced chance of fracture repair or very slow repair. Nerve damage would mean that even if the leg healed, it would be non- functional and Mack would not be able to be released. Only time would tell.

Mack was the most amazing patient and he progressed in leaps and bounds from the word go. He went home with Mamma Eagle Desanka to live in her second shower, and he hand fed from her within the first 24hrs of coming into care. He was totally calm and sensible, as we have found all our wedge tail patients to be, and managed really well with his splint.

Because of his open wounds we initially anaesthetized him every third day and changed his bandage, and then as he healed we stretched it out to a week. We were very hesitant about doing our happy dance for the first few changes, but within the first 2 weeks we could see that the leg was stabilising beautifully and all wounds were healing well. He had excellent foot movement, though he couldn't use it to hold food yet, hence it was easier for him to hand feed. He was using it really well to balance though, which was great.

One morning Desanka went to feed Mack, checking under the crack under the door to see where he was before opening it, and was very surprised when she couldn't see him. Amazingly he had managed to get vertically up onto the shower curtain rail. It was now time for Mack to move into a bigger house, which we created for him at the Vet Centre.

It was so exciting to see that Mack was able to perch perfectly well, though we only gave him low branches in a small enclosure, as we still had to catch him for bandage changes. As his healing progressed we left his bandages on for a week, and he always allowed us to catch him each time without too many dramas which was wonderful.

Finally we decided that Mack had healed enough for us to leave him without a bandage, and we nervously put him into our largest aviary where our previous Wedgies had lived, to regain some fitness. He moved really well around his enclosure, using his leg normally and strongly, grasping food with his foot.

After Mack had been with us for 12 weeks in total, we decided that the time had come and he was ready for release. By then he had increased in weight to 4.2 kg, a fabulous recovery.. We had a large shade cloth covered aluminium framed transport box made for him,

and Desanka and her partner, Chris, took off on the mission to release him. As we were not sure exactly where he had come from, Desanka picked a spot for him between Wyndham and Kununurra with plenty of water on the edge of El Questro station. As you can imagine this was a rather emotional journey.

The release went very smoothly, with Mack soaring off to a nearby tree, and perching there to pass on his thanks, before he took off into the distance. As is the way with all the patients that we release, we always wonder how they are faring. Amazingly some months later we had feedback from someone who had seen a wedgie in the area where he had been released, that had noticeably shorter feathers on one leg than the other. Mack was alive.

And for those of us that believe in synchronicity, this story has a post script.....

As most wildlife carers appreciate, we can form very strong connections to the creatures we have cared for. This was most definitely the case for Mack and Desanka. Months later when Desanka was travelling to Wyndham on one of our weekly clinics, she had a very strong feeling that she was going to see Mack. She had travelled to Wyndham and nearly all the way home without seeing an eagle and was starting to think it was not going to happen, when she spotted an injured kite on the side of the road.

She pulled over to collect her patient, which she had to chase along the edge of the highway and into the bush, when she had the feeling of being watched. As she headed back to the car with her patient, she turned to see an eagle watching her from a nearby tree. We believe it was our boy, come to tell us that he was doing well. Desanka flew in the clinic door that afternoon, buzzing like a bee and flying as high as an eagle in the sky herself. A truly wonderful day: It is days like this which make all the heartaches worth it.

We still see wedge tailed eagles on our journeys between Wyndham and Kununurra. We pray that one day they will be Mack's kids.



**DR SARAH BRETT** has been a vet in the Kimberley for the past 23 years, and has had a passion for treating wildlife and exotics animals for her entire career. She treats all of her patients with a combination of Eastern and Western medicine, and is a great advocate of natural therapies for all.

She treats a great range of wildlife at the Kimberley Vet Centre in Kununurra, from the smallest reptiles, to the largest mammals and every sized bird in between. She is also blessed with a mango farm, 4 dogs and 4 horses and can tell a great story!

