

A BLACK-CAPPED PETREL AT HAITI'S CENTRAL BANK



It is Wednesday afternoon in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Philippe Bayard, Société Audubon Haiti's President, who never misses an opportunity to share his passion for the environment, its beauty and the necessity to preserve and protect it, is sharing some photographs with two friends, Karine Rocourt and Ghislaine Rocourt-Deeb who are in the publishing and advertising business. His enthusiasm reaches a peak when a picture of him proudly holding a bird shows on his laptop computer's screen. It dates back to 2005 and the two women get to hear all about the rare Black-capped petrel, also known in French as the Petrel Diablotin. Learning how it is a migratory bird who feeds on fish and shrimp, comes to the mountains to nest, but moves back to the sea after that process is complete and how incredible his experience was to be holding a member of an endangered species that day.

The following Friday, Karine and Ghislaine are sitting in a third floor office at Haiti's Central Bank (BRH/Banque de la République d'Haiti) where they are in a business meeting with one of the directors, Mr. Stephane Heraux. The sound of something tapping on the glass window distracts Karine who turns to investigate the source and makes the remark that there is a bird outside the window on the office balcony. The meeting is interrupted and all join to go look if the animal, who probably flew into the very large glass window, is still alive and needs assistance. The bird, when approached, moves its head and Karine and Ghislaine are stunned:

- "Isn't that the bird Philippe was showing and talking about the day before yesterday? That cannot be! It is July and they should have all migrated already..."

The bird does look familiar, so they decide to call Philippe and Ghislaine is immediately on the phone:

- "Philippe!", she screams as soon as he answers.

- "Ghislaine!", he shouts back, not understanding why his name is being clamored so loudly over the phone.

- "Your bird is at the Central Bank", she continues, evidently unaware of the fact that she does not make any sense.

- "I am sorry?", replies a now puzzled Philippe.

- "The bird you showed us, that is endangered is at the bank! I don't remember the name now but I am pretty sure it is the same bird and it is alive. He might be injured from having flown into the glass window. What do we do?"

- "Find a box, try to carefully put him in it and bring him back to your house! I will meet you there immediately" is the quick reply.

Mr. Heraux, who happens to have some knowledge of veterinary practices immediately joins in, retrieves a box, pokes holes in it for air and softly directs the bird with the tip of an umbrella to get him into its improvised transportation tool, indicating that the bird should not be touched. Once the box is secured, the meeting is adjourned, Philippe is called back for an update and the sisters are on their way.



Philippe Bayard holding the Black-capped Petrel

Once they are home, Karine retrieves a pair of gardening gloves and takes a careful peak in the box while Ghislaine googles away to find as much as possible on that Petrel Diablotin and in the hope of getting some instructions on how to proceed next. They get confirmation that their suspicion was correct: it is a Black-capped Petrel, a fact immediately confirmed by Philippe who has just arrived and is now on the phone trying to contact members of Société Audubon Haiti to alert them to the news. The first person he is able to reach is Eladio Fernandez in the Dominican Republic who once dealt with a similar situation and who was with him in 2005 when the picture he proudly showed the sisters was taken. His phone is on loud volume and all can hear the phrase they were dreading:

“There is a big chance he might not live and if he does, it will be a miracle.”

All present feel the same sense of responsibility. Was it a coincidence that just 48 hours ago they were talking at length about that very bird?



Ghislaine Rocourt-Deeb, Philippe Bayard and the Black-capped Petrel

Like scouts on a mission, they start making plans. Eladio has recommended that they try to assess any visible injuries, attempt to feed him some fish or some shrimp (if canned, no oil or spices! Only in water.) to at least keep him alive while all contacted try to find a solution or suggestions and get back to Philippe who is already wearing the gardening gloves and delicately taking the petrel out of the box for a preliminary examination. At first look, the bird does not seem to have any visible injury and is behaving in a totally non-aggressive and almost domesticated manner. He does not have a broken wing or leg either.

-“ We should take pictures”, says Karine whose main hobby is photography and came back a few months ago

from a photography training seminar in Washington with National Geographic (another coincidence). This time, Ghislaine proudly poses with Philippe and the Black-capped Petrel who oddly and elegantly obliges.

-“What should be done now?” All decide that Philippe should take the bird, who was just baptized with the name “Gaston”, home while Ghislaine and Karine get some cans of sardines in water to follow up on Eladio’s recommendation. Their 14-year-old nephew, Alessandro Martinez, who was just dropped off from an ecology camp he is attending for the summer, joins in and asks to be part of what he excitedly perceives to be a rescue mission. On their way, they contact a well-known Haitian photographer, Rafaelle Castera, who was also with Karine at the seminar with NatGeo in Washington. She had just come back from an expedition in the north of Haiti, but jumps back in her car with her photographic equipment to rejoin the group at Philippe’s.

When they all arrive, Philippe is still outside, boxed bird in hand and joined by his wife Nora, who he had also called for a situation briefing, and was waiting for him with garden gloves as well. The group moves inside and decides to wait for some more people to reply either by email or by phone, while Philippe continues to reach out to more friends and acquaintances outside Haiti. In the meantime, Karine and Rafaelle are shooting their cameras at Gaston who is too quiet and oblivious to his sudden stardom. He has been taken out of the box by gloved hands and is just crouched on the floor as if his legs could no longer hold him. Fearing internal injuries, nobody wants to try anything yet, so Nora, not forgetting to be the perfect hostess, decides it appropriate to bring in some crackers and fish liver pâté accompanied by a bottle of wine. As soon as she puts the plate down, Gaston gets up on its legs and starts moving, which sends every member of the group into a frenzy.

-“ He is moving!”

- “He smelled Nora’s pâté! He reacted to the smell of fish!”

- “We should feed him now!”

- “Let’s do it!”

- “Stop screaming! You are scaring Gaston!”

Philippe has to calm everybody down and distributes the tasks: two people will put on gloves, the first one will hold the bird firmly but delicately without

compressing its body while the second one will open its beak, gently pulling the head to the back. One will open a can of sardines, one will use the straw also brought in by Nora to break the fish into small pieces that will fill its shaft and using a Q-tip push the food inside the bird's throat. As soon as everybody is ready, the flow of comments finds new life.

- "What if he chokes?"
- "We should also give him water."
- "Put some sugar in the water! We did that twice with birds taken from their nest we had rescued when we were children. They were not petrels but it worked while we figured out how to feed them and they lived!"
- "Let's try just putting the can of sardines in front of him first."

With everyone in total silence, the can was placed in front of the bird and gasps were heard when he started picking at the fish.



- "He is eating! He is eating!"

But he stopped after just a few tries so Philippe decided to break the sardines in smaller pieces with a fork to facilitate things, only to see Gaston move away and crouch again on the floor, same as before. All were disappointed and saddened after what they thought to be such a positive step, but hope would be restored by none other than Gaston himself who started spreading one wing and then the other, as if exercising. He continued on with a meticulous cleaning movement of its feathers with his beak. Joy started to circulate again among the group.

- "A dying bird does not freshen up! He must be a baby! We should feed him!"

And so, Gaston received his first human-directed feeding while Karine was filming and Rafaele was paparazzi-style shooting the whole thing. He also got drops of lightly sweetened water at first from Alessandro and Nora, then some tiny chunks of sardines which he all swallowed.



Gaston receives water from Nora Bayard while being held by Philippe



Rain was now falling and all were patiently waiting for any new development in the animal's reactions. Rafaëlle was now spread out flat on the floor with her camera, still trying to get that perfect picture of "bird at floor level". People were calling back indicating that they were also trying to reach out to others to find something, to find a way to save this bird.



up and down motion, the bird spread its wing as if ready to fly, exposing the beauty and majesty of what was thought could be the beginning of a soaring movement. All were silently in awe and only the furious clicking of two cameras could be heard. They were feeling more hopeful because, as night was falling, the bird was getting more active as if invigorated by the small meal

he had just ingurgitated. It was getting late, so Philippe and Nora decided that Gaston would safely spend the night in their bathroom.

The next morning, a victorious call from Philippe came and with just three words he made it known to the rest of the group that the miracle had begun:

-“Gaston is alive!”



Philippe decided that since the species were familiar with water, he was going to try to take Gaston outside, even just to see its reaction. So, armed with umbrellas to give cover to the photographers of the group, all went outside under the rain, accompanying Philippe who had the petrel in his gloved hands. When he started a

Ghislaine and Karine joined Philippe and Nora at their house for what would be the first of a series of small feedings that would last the entire day. On the menu this time was shrimp still cut in very small pieces and droplets of water. The bird was visibly more active and did not stay still, like the day before, when Ghislaine was holding him, tried to get away from Karine's gloved hands prying his beak open, making it more difficult for Nora to provide a serving of food. But they all felt the kind of happiness that allows one to persevere when convinced that it will lead to the desired result. Gaston himself, now that he had been fed, provided encouragement with his now frequent and vivacious wing spreading exercise and meticulous grooming sessions. He was going to survive another night.

It was now Sunday and the web of professionals and concerned participants was finally producing results: Kelly Crowdis, an American missionary woman and a veterinarian who was “bird educated” and currently living in Haiti had been contacted and she got in touch with Philippe about the Black-capped Petrel that was found, instructing him to bring it to her on the other side of town. All of the instruments used to keep Gaston alive were carefully packed to accompany him yet on another trip to Croix-des-Bouquets where he was left in more knowledgeable hands.



Rafaëlle Castera goes paparazzi on Gaston the Petrel

Later that day, his voice breaking with emotion, Philippe described what had just happened: Gaston was taken to the sea and as he was getting closer to the seashore, he started showing very visible signs of excitement. He was put on a big rock facing the deep blue water and suddenly “shot like a rocket”, his wings fully spread, bringing his invigorated body to familiar grounds and making a group’s prayer for a miracle an incredibly beautiful reality.

An endangered Black-capped Petrel named Gaston did it! He who was probably destined to live his last day on the sunburnt third floor balcony of the prestigious Central Bank of Haiti defied the odds and lived the miracle that is only possible when all who happened, by pure coincidence, to be faced with such a situation decide as one to do all that is possible to make the dream come true. Survival, like the miracle of life is truly a simple group thing.

Amandine Guerre



“Nature’s tower to Gaston: Cleared for take off!”



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