

## Lost in the north

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A rare bird finds a little help from a Hixon farmer and the SPCA. The old saying about it taking a community to raise a child may be altered to say it takes a community to save a bird. Several people have come together to help a feathered friend rarely seen this far north.

At first, a Hixon farmer thought a pigeon had landed near his house, then he thought it was a seagull, and then after the third look at the white bird, he noticed a hump on its back. Roy Zerke knew then it was a rare bird and indeed the southern-dwelling bird is a Cattle Egret that he thinks was led astray by other birds.

"I was led astray by other people when I was younger, maybe he got led astray, too," Zerke laughed. It's an unusual sight to see a Cattle Egret this far north, but there have been other sightings as far as the North West Territories, said amateur bird enthusiast Dave Leman, who has traveled to Africa many times and has gone on Cattle Egret bird counts there for years. He said the birds were brought to the southern States about 1940 and live in the more southern parts of Canada as well.

As Zerke watched the bird he first noticed on Oct. 15, he saw it was only eating bugs and plenty of them. Cattle Egrets only eat insects so when there are no more insects, the bird can't survive.

After calling the Williams Lake SPCA for advice, he did not feed it bread like he wanted to, because that would interfere with its digestive system he was told.

Roy and his wife Jeannine continued to watch and saw the bird fly about 15 feet into the trees near their home for shelter at night and come down to the ground only when the sun had warmed it up enough for the bugs to fly. The Egret's routine was to fly away from the house about 250 feet and then walk back to the house snatching up all the bugs it could eat. Every day was spent that way. As the weather grew colder, Zerke said the bird was moving more slowly and then snow last week really took a toll on the bird.

A neighbour, Pat Suter, an amateur photographer, took pictures of the bird and went to the Prince George SPCA to find out if there was anyone who could help the bird.

Because she was turned away, Suter then came to The Citizen for assistance. With a few strategic phone calls, the Northern Wildlife Rescue was notified and Rachel Morey, who has rehabilitated birds for the last 10 years, called Suter and put the wheels in motion to get the bird captured safely. (Morey said she would make sure all staff at the SPCA would be informed about contacting the Northern Wildlife Rescue in these circumstances.)

Suter contacted Leman, the bird enthusiast, he in turn called the Zerke's and asked if he could come over and try to catch the bird. Leman had called the Burnaby Wildlife Rescue for advice and brought a blanket to throw over the bird to catch it without harm. The blanket was too light and the bird

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A cattle egret, which is rare to this area, was brought into the Prince George SPCA. The bird seemed at home in the warm building, especially with crickets donated by students at Highglen Montessori elementary school, and meal worms donated by Total Pet. (Citizen photo by David Mah)

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escaped all attempts.

But of course, it was a farmer's common sense that caught the bird after Leman spent hours trying. Zerke said he put his thinking cap on and realized they could try to herd the bird into a snow-fence enclosure placed under his bay window and it worked. In 15 minutes the bird was safely in a cage on its way back to Prince George Wednesday with Leman, who thought a good name for the bird might be Lucky.

After an overnight stay with Leman the bird was placed in the care of the North Cariboo SPCA who will assess its health and then make arrangements for it to be taken to the Burnaby Wildlife Rescue in about a week. After that, it will be released in a safe place. Morey, of the Northern Wildlife Rescue, said the bird will be calorie-loaded while it is here in Prince George and then it will be moved.

"It all sounds good at this point," Morey said.

Lani Sheldon, team leader of wildlife rehabilitation at the Wildlife Rescue in Burnaby, said after the Cattle Egret has a full assessment, it will be placed in an outdoor aviary to regain its strength to fly and then it will most likely be released at Boundary Bay where other Cattle Egrets have been sighted. To some people, it might seem like a lot of trouble for one bird, Leman added.

"We all just feel good about coming together to save this bird - especially since the weather has turned," Leman said. "It's about one precious little life and it's wonderful so many people have reached out to this bird."

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