

‘...a very  
extreme form  
of generosity.’

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## *Nature calls, ambulance answers*

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# *Nature calls...*



...and volunteers answer, rescuing everything left behind by the meagre one-species ambulances. From overgrown arachnids to flightless fowl, these anonymous saviours see it all. And you can too. Buckle up and hold on. We're riding shotgun with the Dierenambulance.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SUNNY BLECKINGER

**W**hen feathers fly or canines howl, the Dierenambulance is on the call. Rain or shine. More reliable than the mailman—and friendlier too—they deliver lost kittens to the animal shelter, injured foxes to the vet and sick hedgehogs to the *egelopvang*. (Rumour has it that numerous hedgehogs were found in an irritable state, due to the recent warm winter, which disturbed their hibernation.) But, with over 5,000 birds saved each year in Amsterdam alone, it's the flying creatures that are most in need of attention: broken wings, respiratory problems, abandoned ducklings or cold feet—literally. When waters freeze, many birds get their feet stuck in the ice.

'A lot of people call for that,' explains Annelies Vlap, Communications Director for the Dierenambulance. Approximately 14,500 animals are aided each year, she explains, averaging roughly 40 a day. A hefty number, considering the organisation survives almost exclusively on donations and a volunteer workforce.

'But it's not for everyone,' says Vlap. Volunteers visit every section of the city, anywhere animals are found, and the things they see are not always pretty. But regardless of prior experience, anyone interested may sign up. First step: hang with the experts.

Normally, it's wise to schedule a preliminary ride along on a fairly quiet day, ensuring that there's enough time to explain everything and that the uninitiated aren't overwhelmed. Early morning on a rainy Saturday, for example, should be perfect. Most residents are asleep. Those that are awake stay home. And with animals unable to use a phone, well, few calls are expected.

But today turns out to be anything but quiet. The clouds quickly blow away, and there is nearly no end to the calls for animals in need—not until the last hours of daylight, when the rain returns, does the city grow calm once more.

#### Reunited between the sheets

Around 8.30, 15-year veteran Monique Fakkeldij shows up in the requisite green and yellow garb, all embroidered with the Dierenambulance logo. She says good morning to the other early risers, and then heads downstairs to check her ambulance. 'Just a daily check, to make sure it's clean, and everything's there.'

In the garage, three shining white ambulances are parked, waiting for action. Monique slides open her vehicle's large side door and goes through the gear. There are four containers for transporting dogs and cats (and occasionally herons), three smaller cages for hamsters and birds and a little styrofoam box for bats. 'They don't like a lot of light,' explains Monique. There's also a canvas sack for snakes, heavy duty gloves for animals that might scratch and a small box of latex gloves—'for *vieze dingen*'.

The remaining space contains a small, dog-sized bed with an oxygen pump and a suction unit, two seats for human passengers, an assortment of towels, plastic bags and bungee cords, along with a detailed street map and an electronic chip reader for dogs and cats that have chips embedded under their skin. 'That often makes it much easier to find the owner,' Monique points out.

Additional instruments are fastened



behind a door on the other side of the van: a small stretcher, shovel, rubber tongs, a large net for catching birds and a *vangstok*—a metal pole with a canvas noose that can be lowered from one end. 'I almost never use this,' says Monique. 'It's not very animal-friendly, but sometimes you have to. Sometimes it's either him or you.' On any given day, she will improvise with a variety of these objects, depending on the situation.

blanket and the bird seems surprisingly calm. 'Under the blanket,' she explains, 'it's dark, so they relax and go to sleep. Same with chickens.'

Just before departing for the bird shelter, they get a call about another swan sitting on the other side of the same stretch of motorway. A police car is already at the scene, awaiting their arrival. Monique explains that it's probably the female. 'Swan partners live their entire

## When they find the cat, its fur is wet, the snout is covered in blood and one eyeball is dangling from its socket. On its collar is the name 'Lucky'. The obvious joke is made, but no one laughs.

Her partner Jo (who prefers not to have her last name used) arrives shortly afterwards, followed by the night crew, who arrive at the end of their shift with a large male swan they picked up on the A10 motorway. Nothing appears to be physically wrong with the bird, but the fact that he was sitting on the side of the road suggests that something's not right. The swan is transferred to Monique and Jo's ambulance, where he will be delivered to the *vogelopvang*. Monique wraps him in a

lives together. If you find one, you're likely to find its partner waiting nearby.'

Sure enough, at the scene, a female swan sits in the wet mud, somewhat out of breath. Monique carries her into the ambulance, wraps her in a blanket next to the male, and sits in the back with them. The two police officers smile and wave as Jo pulls away, heading to the bird shelter. Once there, the two birds will be cared for until both are healthy enough to be released.

#### T-shirt pizza

The *vogelopvang*—open to visitors six days a week (see [www.toevlucht.nl](http://www.toevlucht.nl))—is located in a green, lush area of De Bijlmer, surrounded by a canal and filled with a variety of spacious cages for the many birds in residence. Several ducks are in one large cage, a lone heron stands in another, and next to that, the swans are mixed with a few recuperating seagulls. Injured birds of prey dwell on the other side of the shelter, and there is an open section—half on the water—from which the birds can fly away when they feel strong enough. (Though a few birds look suspiciously healthy already, perhaps just lazily enjoying the free food.)

Inside an enclosed den next to the cages, an elegant long-eared owl sits in the dark. Jo explains that they had found him two weeks earlier near Oosterpark. 'People saw him on the street. They called us after putting him into a cat box, and he made no struggle against being picked up. That's a very bad sign. He didn't look happy when we picked him up; I didn't think he would survive.'

She says that birds of prey are highly susceptible to stress. 'Simply handling one can be too stressful for it to survive much longer. But sometimes that's a risk you must take.' As she talks, the owl watches everyone closely, slowly moving its head like a high-precision security camera. Its ears stick straight up, like short furry antlers.

Nearby, a yellow duckling basks in the warmth of a heat lamp hanging above him. 'This was the first baby bird we found this year,' says Jo. 'People called us because they saw him sitting all alone on the ground. We don't know what happened to his parents, but we brought him here before a cat or another predator found him.'

'We should go,' cuts in Monique, who just got a call on the radio. 'There's a dead cat on the road. We should pick it up before it's completely pizza.'

On the way there, Jo slows the vehicle as two ducks waddle across the road. 'That happens a lot now,' explains Monique. 'It's mating season. The male ducks chase the females and they walk everywhere—including under cars.'

They drive around for a little while, but the only thing on the street is a crumpled up T-shirt. 'It happens a lot that people phone us for a dead animal on the road,' explains Monique, 'and it turns out to be an umbrella, or a large white plastic bag, which they think is a swan.'

Another call comes in for a dead heron that was spotted near Park Frankendaal in Oost. On arrival, it appears to have been run over. A group of chickens that roam through the park are pecking the ground nearby. Monique and Jo put the heron into a grey plastic sack, record when and where they found it, and return to headquarters.

There, the cadaver is stored in the building's small mortuary. It's full of dead animals, all kept very cold, and a light sour smell lingers in the air. Animals that could potentially have owners are bagged, tagged and kept on the shelves for a couple weeks, giving time for the owners to call about their missing pets. Wild animals are placed into what is essentially a large trash bin, where they are collected each week for cremation. Jo lifts the lid and drops the heron onto a pile of carcasses: a white swan, a brown

fox and a black *meerkoot* with its legs sticking straight up.

Monique and Jo head upstairs for coffee. 'It may seem like sometimes we're a bit cold,' says Jo, 'but after doing this long enough, you learn to separate your emotions from the work. You have to.'

#### A lot to handle

Around the coffee table, Jo shares stories about some of the more unusual calls. 'I collected a butterfly once,' she recalls. 'It was during football championships. These guys called from a pub, saying they had a butterfly as big as their hand. We thought: "They're pissed. It's probably just a bat." We arrive at the bar—yes, everyone was pissed—but they had a plastic container with holes poked in it. Inside was an enormous beautiful butterfly. Very exotic. We took it to Artis zoo. They said it probably escaped from somebody's private collection.'

'I don't understand.' Just then, Monique walks into the room with a live pigeon in her hands. 'I just don't understand,' she repeats, frustrated. Much of the bird's wings have been clipped. It was brought to their front door by a resident who found it on the street. 'If you have birds in your home,' continues Monique, 'you might clip their wings. But these pigeons will never be domesticated. There's no reason to clip its wings. It will just sit in nature and die.' She heads downstairs to put it in a cage in the ambulance. A frisky kitten that was found earlier is also placed into the ambulance—each animal bound for its respective shelter.

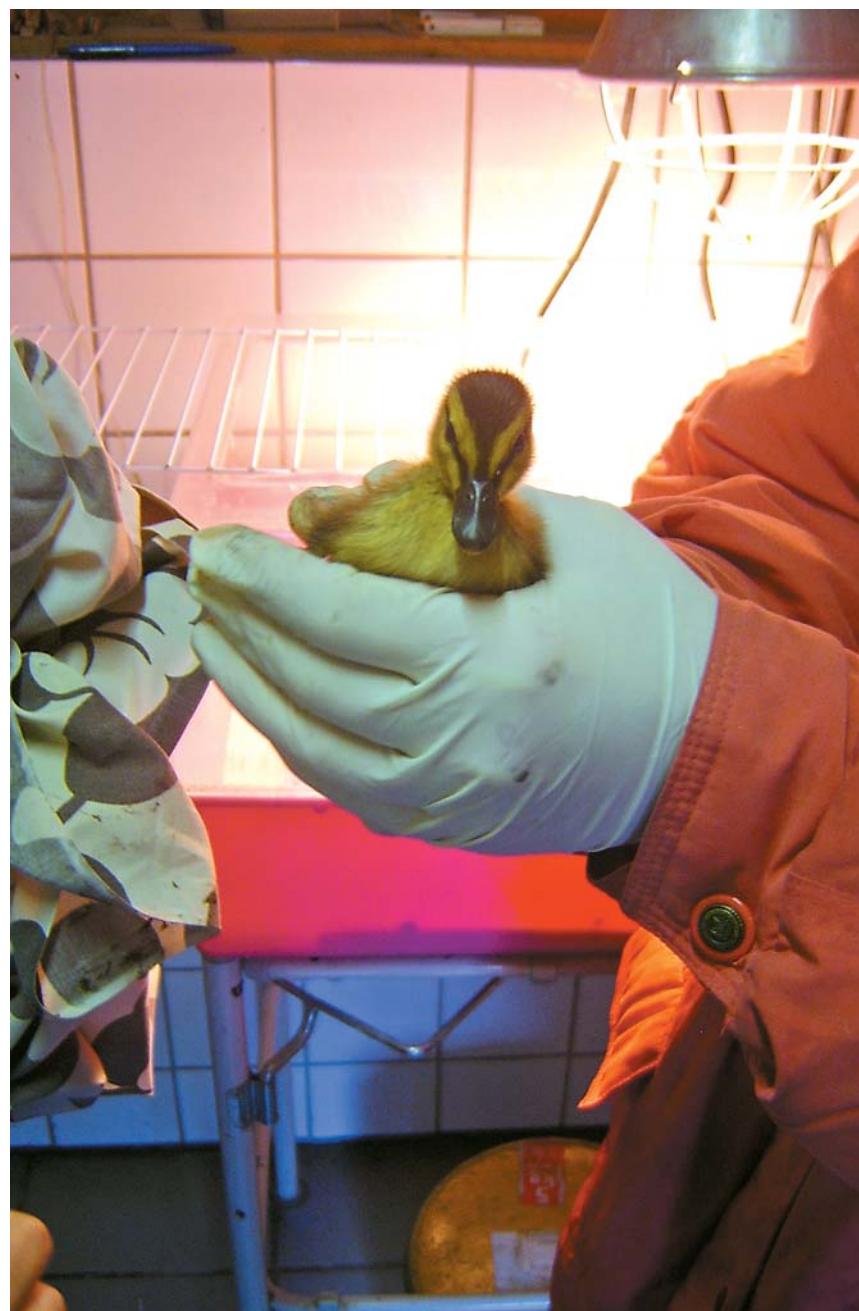
Jo and Monique hop in the front, and head back out. But first—*beep beep beep*—the radio goes off. Near the T-shirt they spotted in De Blijmer, there is in fact a dead cat. This time, the caller gives more accurate directions. When they find it, its fur is wet, the snout is covered in blood and one eyeball is dangling from its socket. On its collar is the name 'Lucky'. The obvious joke is made, but no one laughs. Monique checks it for an electronic chip. Negative. But the collar gives an address and phone number. 'His owners live here in the neighbourhood.' Monique grabs the radio, asking if they should personally go to the owner. There's no time. An old woman in Amstelveen has a sick dog and she needs a ride to the vet. On the way, they stop by the bird shelter, drop off the pigeon, and say a few soothing words to the kitten, who yawns in its cage, then falls asleep.

'You have only a short time with the animals,' explains Monique. 'Just bring them to the vet or the shelter. Then it's out of your hands and you go to the next animal. You don't normally call the vet later to follow up.'

'We have six ambulances,' Jo says. 'Today we're the only ones out. It would be nice to have another car out, but there are just not enough volunteers. In the summer, I think we might be able to pay some people to help. It gets extremely busy then.'

'When you first start,' explains Monique, 'you have lessons on how to handle birds, the behaviour of dogs, see if they will bite, that sort of thing. But until you're really ready, you always go with an experienced person and learn everything from them.'

'Of course, it's not only handling animals,' adds Jo, 'but also people.'



#### Floating footstool

Monique and Jo arrive at the house in Amstelveen. While stepping out of the ambulance, Monique explains that it's not yet clear what's wrong with the dog. 'I think the old lady is confused.'

The door is opened by a small and delicate old woman. She says hello, blinks a couple times and, after she is asked about her pet, slowly turns and points a shaky hand down the hall behind

the dog and the old woman. Monique sits in the back of the ambulance with both of them, asking gentle questions about the animal, as Jo drives to a nearby vet.

Once there, the old woman is helped out of the ambulance, grabs this reporter's hand, and doesn't let go until walking the 15 metres to the door of the vet. She takes very small steps, doesn't say much, and smiles every time she is looked at. But her glazed eyes seem to

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her. There, in the kitchen of her small, ground-floor home, a cinnamon-coloured poodle is standing, back legs trembling, looking at nothing in particular. On top of his back is a plastic footstool, resting somewhat like a saddle. Evidently, the dog, which is 14 years old and completely blind, walked under the stool and is now carrying it.

Monique speaks reassuringly to the animal, removes the footstool, and gently puts her hands on its fur, checking for injuries. Beyond a coat full of fleas and its decrepit old age, no harm is immediately apparent.

A leash is attached to the animal's collar, and everyone exits the house, collectively slowing down to the pace of

suggest something deeper than mere concern for an ageing dog.

The vet takes them in to be examined and Monique and Jo agree to wait, ensuring the old woman has a ride home. 'We try to accommodate them as much as we can,' explains Jo, while Monique follows the doctor into the examination room. 'It depends on how many ambulances are on the road; we can't guarantee that we'll be on time to pick them up—especially if there's an emergency.'

After about 20 minutes, the door of the examination room opens and the old woman comes out sobbing. The vet has advised that the dog be put to sleep. It has heart problems, trouble breathing and, in general, little quality of life. The vet tells

Monique and Jo to attend to their other calls; she'll arrange a taxi for the woman. Outside, Monique explains that the old woman had just cremated her husband three weeks before. 'Now the dog has to go and that's the last thing she has.'

#### Swan's song

Out in the ambulance, the kitten is sleeping peacefully. They drive past an AH to go, grab a few sandwiches, and head to the next call. It's become something of a regular thing—for the past month, they've been trying to catch the same sick goose. Each time they try, it flies off into the water. 'We can't get them if they're in the water,' explains Monique. 'We don't have boats or any water equipment. Often we must wait until they're too weak to escape.'

Today is that day. The sick bird is too tired to fly very far, and doesn't stay long in the water. After a couple unsuccessful attempts with the large net, Monique slowly walks up to the bird holding out a piece of sandwich bread. Hyperventilating, it doesn't resist. Monique calmly takes the animal in her arms, carrying it to the ambulance.

Two older ladies walk by. 'Look, they finally caught the sick goose.' 'The what?' 'The sick goose, look.' 'Oh, the poor darling.' 'I see him here everyday. He looks awful.' 'Oh, the poor darling.'

Jo drives to the nearby emergency vet and Monique sits in the back again, steadying the goose on her lap while holding an oxygen mask to its beak. The bird's tongue, which was turning bluish, slowly returns to a healthier salmon colour. The kitten watches through its cage, one paw holding onto the bars.

In the emergency waiting room, a young couple sit with their dog in a box, somewhat stunned at the sight of a large goose being carried in. Jo rings the bell, and, after a short minute that feels too long, the busy vet comes out quickly from the back. 'Ach, sjonga. OK, bring her in.' The bird's tongue is turning blue again.

Once on the examination table, the doctor inspects the long throat, gently squeezing, checking for obstructions. She looks into its mouth with a flashlight. The goose tries to struggle, but has little strength after the prolonged illness. Dark little eyes look around the room; its agonised breathing becomes more strained.

The doctor exchanges quick words with the ambulance drivers and a decision is made. A clear fluid is injected into the animal's foot, and within seconds, the bird rests her head on the table. The breathing stops. It's all over.

'I agree with the vet,' Monique would later explain. 'We couldn't find anything in the throat blocking it. Sure, you could do surgery, but if it can't even breathe... The best thing is to simply give it peace.'

The bird is placed into a large, grey plastic bag and taken back to the ambulance. The young couple in the waiting room glance fearfully at the lumpy form in the grey bag. Outside, the floor of the ambulance is quickly sterilised as dark clouds return in the sky, dropping a sudden torrent of rainfall. The groggy kitten meows.

'We can finally take the little cat in,' says Monique. 'Poor guy. He's probably traumatised after all that.'