



# Finding Sanctuary

BY DEIRDRE COLEMAN

Located on a bush-clad ridge above Matakana, an hour's drive north of Auckland, The Sanctuary is home to nearly 100 native and exotic birds and animals, and two incredibly kind-hearted people. It's a very special place where the lost and persecuted can find refuge.

Shawn Bishop and Michael Dixon, who own and run The Sanctuary, have dedicated themselves to rescuing, nurturing and restoring the trust of animals that have been abandoned, neglected and abused. The 13 hectares on which they settled in 2002 is now a safe haven for a menagerie of donkeys, pigs, goats, ducks, parrots, ex-battery hens and native birds.

It's a public holiday when we arrive, but Shawn and Michael aren't relaxing; they rarely get time for that. Assisted by two WWOOFers (Willing Workers on Organic Farms), they're doing what they do every day at this time: cleaning their large open-plan living room. When nectar-eating birds are sharing your home, it's a chore you can't put off.

Setting aside her mop, Shawn welcomes us and introduces Heather from Palmerston North, and Bronny who's at The Sanctuary to learn sign language so she can work with primates in America. WWOOFers, Shawn explains, come from all

over the world to stay at The Sanctuary and help them with the animals. Shawn and Michael pour their own money, time and resources into their rescue work, aided by donations from the public, and they're grateful for any extra help they can get.

Originally from North America, Shawn says her love of animals began at an early age and has never waned. 'I used to play at being a wild horse,' she jokes, 'and I spent all my allowance on food for strays, and taking in squirrels. I was a little Dr Dolittle. Everything for me was about animals.' Neither she nor Michael has a veterinary background, but that hasn't held them back. 'It's just about love and passion. We read, ask questions, make mistakes and learn from them, just like any parent does.'

But rescuing abused, injured or neglected animals isn't for the idle or faint hearted. 'It's really hard work,' admits Shawn. 'You clean constantly, and going on holiday is difficult. Someone has to be here morning and evening to feed and look after the animals. Routines are essential.'

The day begins at around 7am, when Shawn, Michael and any resident WWOOFers divvy up the work and start the first round of feeding. This takes a couple of hours, and they then



## meet a couple who have dedicated their lives to animal welfare

get a chance to have their own breakfast. In the evenings, it's the same procedure. The middle of the day is spent cleaning cages, caring for sick animals and exercising the wings of injured birds. There's also the difficult task of sourcing native food such as berries, bugs and worms for the birds.

Fortunately, we're visiting at a relatively quiet time. Michael and Shawn have just released a large group of tuis and kingfishers. 'It's a sad but rewarding time,' says Shawn. 'I always cry.' It's something you can't escape with work like this, she says. 'There's a lot of heartache. Every animal has a story and every story is shocking.' Rather than succumbing to anger or frustration when they encounter cases of abuse and neglect, Shawn and Michael channel their love and energy into caring for the animals and rescuing even more.

In a large cage near the windows is an elegant Sulphur-crested cockatoo. At 21, Snow is still an adolescent (cockatoos can live to be 100) and for 18 years she was much loved by her owner. Unfortunately, he's now serving a long prison sentence and, after a couple of failed rehoming, Snow ended up back at Bird Rescue. She's been at The Sanctuary for three years and has become very fond of Michael. 'She's fallen in love with

him,' laughs Shawn. 'He looks a lot like her original owner.'

Large birds tend to bond with a human and often resent that person's partner. Snow has bitten Shawn a few times, but by learning to be dominant yet affectionate, Shawn has gained Snow's respect and friendship. Michael's other treasured companion is Doris, a 19-year-old moggy. She lazes happily in the sun while birds fly around her. All of Shawn and Michael's cats have been taught to not even look at the birds. 'Cats are very trainable,' says Shawn, 'but you have to be consistent with them.'

Most of the birds at The Sanctuary are natives, brought there by vets or the Department of Conservation. Some also come from Bird Rescue centres. Often they've fallen from their nests or been hit by cars. Shawn is currently nursing Pumpkin, a baby wood pigeon, or keruru, blown from her nest. Her soft orange down earned her her name and, like a baby, she needs constant care. Initially it was hourly feedings, now Pumpkin has five meals a day. As we talk, Shawn hand-feeds her tiny pieces of banana and pear, with peas and corn. Then something incredible happens. A tui called Cassidy swoops across the room from his cage in the corner and hovers above us.

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Shawn shows me a trick that not even Michael has seen before. Holding a piece of corn aloft she lets it go and Cassidy dives in and catches it mid-air in his beak. This may not seem all that amazing, until you learn that Cassidy has only one eye and was virtually a goner when he arrived at The Sanctuary.

'He's undergoing long-term rehab with us,' explains Shawn. 'He came in very badly injured – he'd probably been hit by a car. Half his face was gone and he was paralysed. But he had such spirit. Soon he began hopping on one leg. That's how he got his name, after Hopalong Cassidy. Our goal was to get him to grip. One day he tried to fly and went down in a one-wing spiral to the ground. But he kept trying and the spiral got bigger and soon it became an arc, and then a straight line.' Shawn says it's an inspiration how he zooms around the house at 100 miles an hour.

'We don't teach any of our birds to talk,' she says. 'I don't see any sense in that. But they all talk.' That certainly

**'Cassidy dives in and catches the corn mid-air in his beak. This may not seem all that amazing, until you learn that Cassidy has only one eye and was virtually a goner when he arrived at The Sanctuary.'**

hadn't escaped me. While Shawn and I are talking, there's been constant chatter from Cassidy, and our discussion prompts him into a lengthy monologue. His vocal range is impressive. 'They're excellent mimics and he's quite a hit,' laughs Shawn. 'Every one of the WWOOFers that comes here, regardless

of where they're from, swears he's saying something in their language.' Cassidy can also mimic the sound of the squeegee on the window, can say his name and several other phrases, such as 'give me a kiss', and 'tui, tui, tui'. 'TuIs are beautiful, but they're bullies,' says Shawn. 'They learn the other birds' calls, imitate them and then claim their territory as their own.'

After Pumpkin's lunch, Shawn shows us around the property. It's bordered by 160 hectares of protected native bush, so rehabilitated native birds can be safely released. The trees around us are alive with bird calls of every kind, but when Shawn and Michael bought the property, the bush was virtually silent.



We descend a wooden stairway to the first of two duck ponds. Here, around 20 orphan ducks swim happily. There's a second pond further down the track. The couple also work closely with animal rescue groups to rehome and rehabilitate rescued battery hens, and have about 20 at The Sanctuary.

But it's not just birds at The Sanctuary. In fact, the very first residents were a pair of Jerusalem donkeys (so called for the dark cross on their backs). Bartholomew and his mother, Bethlehem, were found abandoned and starving in a remote paddock and their rescue coincided perfectly with The Sanctuary's opening. Bethlehem has since passed away but Bartholomew has a best friend in Solomon, who is happy to have escaped the beatings from his previous owner.

Solomon lets out a loud bray as we arrive and ambles up to us. Shawn has been explaining the importance of understanding animals' body language, and suddenly she kneels on the ground with her head pressed up under Bartholomew's chin.

*'Shawn kneels on the ground with her head pressed up under Bartholomew's chin. "This is how donkeys hug," she says.'*

'This is how donkeys hug', she says. Sadly, almost everywhere in the world, these gentle creatures have been the victims of a major misconception. Shawn explains that the saying "stubborn as a mule/donkey" comes from the fact that donkeys completely shut down when they're scared or threatened.

'No matter what you do, they won't move,' she says. 'You can yell at them or beat them, and they'll stay completely still. People misinterpret that as stubbornness. It's just fear.'

Solomon and Bartholomew have demonstrated their capacity for compassion by welcoming a special equine member into their herd.

Romeo, a lovely white miniature

horse, suffered years of regular mistreatment at the hands of a pair of boys. Shawn says he was a nervous wreck when he first arrived at The Sanctuary. 'No matter what the weather, he wouldn't go into the barn. That's where the boys had cornered and mistreated him,' she says. Now, under the wing of his donkey protectors, Romeo has overcome his fears.




Next we meet Jose and Rosie, a pair of Kunekune pigs with personalities to match their hefty physiques. Both came to The Sanctuary in a sorry condition, but now, lying on the grass, grunting as we give them a tummy rub, they're healthy, content and relaxed. Nearby are the goats, Lucky and Nellie. They, too, have their own sad pasts, but fortunately that's now far behind them. Appropriately named, Lucky was rescued from an abattoir as he was in line for slaughter. Contrary to popular belief, goats hate being alone and need a companion. He's now best friends with Nellie, who arrived petrified, having been staked outside in the hot sun and left to starve or die of thirst. 'I sat with her in the stable for several days without moving or showing her my hands,' says Shawn. 'I gradually moved food closer to me and softly told her that she'd never be chained again. When I was able to release her into the paddock, she didn't know what to do. Suddenly she started racing around, leaping and kicking with joy.'

It's this incredible dedication and commitment from Shawn and Michael that has made The Sanctuary such a

special place. When school groups come to visit, Shawn teaches the children about native birds and how to care for animals. The couple has also opened a bed and breakfast to supplement their income and allow people to experience The Sanctuary. 'It's really only animal-lovers who come here and they want to help out. We interact a lot with our guests and tell them stories. They live with us, eat vegetarian meals and share in the work,' says Shawn.

As we're leaving, two enormous chickens walk up to our car. They've been bred specifically for size and would normally be slaughtered for their meat at around six weeks old. But this pair was somehow rescued.

Shawn gives them calcium supplements to help strengthen their leg bones to bear their weight. Neither is likely to live beyond their first birthday; their hearts will give out due to their size.

It's the only sad ending we've encountered at The Sanctuary, but it's a reminder of all the other animals out there in need of rescuing. Thankfully, people like Shawn and Michael are dedicating their lives to doing just that. 

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