

At Times Such As These

Article by Richard Murphy PRO Westmeath Environmental Group

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At times such as these, when skies are low and so are our spirits, when all we hear seems to be of doom and gloom, it is good to be able to share a good news story with a real-life happy ending.

It started last December when Sarah Caffrey and husband Peter were walking near Whitebridge Bay on Lough Ennell and Sarah noticed that one of a pair of swans was in difficulty. One of its wings was very seriously damaged and dragging in the water and the bird itself was weak. But, even in this state, Sarah was impressed by its spirit and its will to live and by the faithful way its mate stayed by her and protected her. In fact you might say that the redoubtable Sarah had found a kindred spirit!

For the next nine months, through all the miseries of weather and season, Sarah and Peter went every single day to the lake to feed the swans and keep the flame of life flickering. The swans learned to recognise them and to respond to Sarah's voice and there is no doubt that she kept the swan alive even as the wing wasted away. (And kept the loyal male fed as well!).

During all this time Sarah and the members of W.E.G. were trying in every way possible to get expert help for the bird. But to no avail – incredibly, in the county of the Children of Lir, we could not find

anyone to help. We even offered, from our meagre resources, to pay fees and expenses. Nothing. The general line – from the few who bothered to talk – was to let the swan die – “let Nature take its course” they called it. One wonderful person, employed by our state, told us, “my concern is not with the swan, but with its habitat”. Brilliant. A nice place to live, pity the bird is dead. It would have enjoyed it, I’m sure!

Then, two weeks ago, the miracle. We had been in touch with Birdwatch Ireland, seeking advice and we went back to them in despair at our hopeless pursuit of help. We spoke to Niall Hatch (what a perfect name for a birdman!) the Development Officer and persuaded him to come and see for himself. And he agreed! On Sunday 7th last he arrived with Steve (another Birdwatch man) and assessed the situation after Sarah had called the swans to us for examination. (He was very impressed with that!). And he gave us hope. He thought he knew a man who could help, and we would know within a week.

Talk about keeping your word! And talk about rapid action! Last Saturday THEY arrived. Six foot plus and German PLUS his lovely, unflappable, Irish girlfriend. The swan was examined. A vet had already been arranged by them (also from Wicklow, by the way,) and treatment was immediately underway. And the prognosis is excellent. The vet believes that the wing can be mended, that the feathers could grow again, and that a full recovery is possible. Even the possibility of cygnets in the future! We told you it was a good-news story.

We could, and possibly should, give out about the total lack of help and support available in this, the Lake County. We would prefer to

focus now on the heroes of the story. Niall Hatch and Steve of Birdwatch Ireland. (Worthy of all our support.) Christian Osthoff and Faith and their wonderful (and anonymous) vet. And most of all Sarah and Peter Caffrey who never gave up during the long, long nine months. But, sure, we always knew that they were gracious enough to be swans themselves!

Thank you to Packy Mac for trying to get help for the swan.

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