

Their pain, and mine

BY TOM DICKSON

One summer morning a few years ago, I walked past the pond by my office and noticed something struggling in the water. It was a baby house sparrow that must have fallen from a nest. It was obvious that, without help, it would soon drown. Still, it was just a sparrow, and I started to walk away. But then I surprised myself by turning around, kicking off my shoes, and wading into the chest-deep water to save the chick. I was too late.

I put the lifeless form on the bank, then sat down on the grass, soaking wet, to consider what I'd just done. I'm no fan of house sparrows, invasive species that crowd out native songbirds. And you wouldn't think someone like me, who blasts pheasants, grouse, and ducks out of the sky each hunting season, would care about the death of a single baby sparrow.

In fact, I'm generally undisturbed by an animal's death, if it happens "humanely" (a word that I recognize is open to wide interpretation). A deer or elk dropped with one shot. A cow that happily grazes a Montana pasture all summer then is dispatched by a bolt gun. How could someone who eats meat, game or domestic, feel otherwise?

Yet I wince at even the thought of an animal feeling pain or terror. It's a paradox, I know.

I'm not the only hunter who feels this way. My FWP colleague Laurie Wolf told me of a fellow who brought an injured owl to the FWP Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. He'd been hunting elk deep in the backcountry when he came upon a small owl flopping around on the forest floor. It was emaciated and obviously blind in one eye. For whatever reason, the hunter couldn't just leave it there. He threw his jacket over the bird so he could carry it back to the trailhead, then drove to Helena. He walked into the center, handed over the owl, and said, "Here, do what you guys do," then left without another word.

Some of my favorite YouTube videos

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show people rescuing wildlife. Often it's one or two hunters who find a coyote tangled in barbed wire, or a deer caught in a fence, or a moose that has broken through an iced-over pond. Their rescue attempts are nerve-racking to watch. The animals could bite or kick, causing severe injuries. Despite the danger, the rescuers seem unable to walk away and leave the animals to suffer.

Most hunters I know would likely do the same. They certainly take pains not to leave the game animals they hunt wounded and struggling. They commit to making a single killing shot, which requires patience and discipline. Sometimes that means not shooting at all, even after a long day (or days) afield. And when they don't make a lethal kill, they track the wounded animal, sometimes for hours or even days, to put it out of its misery (and, yes, to recover the meat or antlers).

It's true that some hunters—though not many, in my experience—seem indifferent to the pain of animals. They'll announce they "stuck" a deer or elk over the weekend with an ill-placed arrow. Or they might shoot at a Canada goose or tundra swan overhead that's too far away to be killed (though not injured). Each year, FWP game wardens report instances of hunters "flock shooting"—firing

into an elk herd in the hopes of killing some (and usually wounding others in the process).

I confess I too have wounded wildlife. I've never shot a big game animal without killing it. But each year, despite my best efforts to shoot accurately, I "rock" a passing duck or flushing rooster then watch it fly off, a half-dozen steel pellets imbedded in its belly or back.

Those injuries, which add up over the years, increasingly haunt me. I could stop hunting, of course, but the pleasure it affords still outweighs the moments of guilt.

In *Witness of Combines*, a collection of essays on rural life, author Kent Meyers writes, "...if you wound an animal, you become responsible for its pain." I carry those words with me every time I hunt.

Perhaps it was a sense of responsibility that drew me to that struggling baby sparrow. By trying to alleviate one bird's suffering, maybe I hoped to make amends for all the birds I've injured, and thereby start to heal the small but growing number of wounds inside me. 🐾