

Chirp's Wild Story

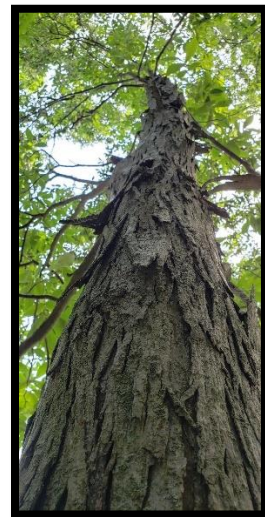
Susan Gee Heino



Chirp is a Mourning Dove, one of the most common birds in North America. His personal story, however, is anything but common!

Chirp's life began in an egg, in a nest, high in the branches of a shagbark hickory tree. He had one sibling. I don't know if Chirp ever actually met his parents or if he hatched when they weren't around. All I know is that at some point, for some reason, his nest was left without parental supervision.

On the afternoon of June 28, 2013, I just happened to be in the backyard of my rural home when I heard a commotion above me in the trees. Glancing up, I watched as a huge turkey vulture raided a nest. It was so high up there! The large bird was struggling in the small branches—clearly they could not support his weight. The nest came tumbling down and the vulture flew off. As the nest came tumbling through the leaves, I literally found it with its tiny inhabitants at my feet.



One of the hatchlings inside had clearly been deceased for some time. There were maggots. And a terrible smell. That is probably what attracted the turkey vulture to begin with. The other hatchling, however, was just fine. The nest protected him during his fall, although he didn't have much energy or strength. Inside the nest with him were the broken halves of one egg. I was taken by the fact that this tiny bird would have fit perfectly into these halves—he couldn't have been out of that egg long, at all.

Not sure what to make of this, the only thing I could figure is that something must have happened to his parents. Ordinarily, birds want to keep their nests clean, both for the sake of the young ones and to keep predators from catching a scent. Why would this bird's parents not have tossed out the dead chick or the egg pieces? Unless, perhaps, something had happened to the parents.

It could very well have been that the parents were gone for a day or two. Maybe this poor little baby had not even hatched before the parents disappeared. Either way, it was very clear he needed help.

The best thing to do when a baby bird falls out of a nest is to put him back into the nest. Don't worry about that old wives' tale that birds will reject their young if they smell humans; it's not true. They want their young to survive and they will gladly take them back if they can. In this case, the entire nest was out of the tree and there was no way I could get it back up into those tippy-top boughs.



So, I tidied the nest and got a small basket from the house. I couldn't get to the top of the tree, but I climbed a ladder as high as I could and hung the basket with the nest—and it's tiny passenger—snug inside it on the highest branch I could reach. Then I sat back to wait, hoping the parents would return and the vulture would not.

All afternoon my daughter and I kept vigil, from a safe distance. There was no sign of any mourning doves in the area. There was, however, an approaching storm. We kept our eyes on that, too.

As the temperature dropped and the wind picked up, we just knew we couldn't leave the poor birdie out there alone. So, I went up the ladder again and brought him inside. He was cold and lethargic, so I put him with his basket/nest under a lamp to warm him up.

The storm lasted an hour or so and the afternoon had turned into evening. The sun was setting but we still had hope that our little chick and his parents could be reunited, so up the ladder I went again. We watched and waited through dinner time and through sunset. Still there was no sign of any mourning doves anywhere. Our tiny friend was alone in the world.

Another storm was on its way and we knew he'd never make it through the night. All we could do was climb back up that ladder and bring the fading little bird back into our home. I was doubtful he would survive in human care, but we just couldn't let him spend his final hours alone in a storm.



My middle-school aged kids were excited for this funny looking little visitor. They named him Chirp. I warned them that he likely wouldn't survive, but that we would at least keep him comfortable and warm. As the lamp helped heat him, he seemed happier already. Maybe if we thought he would live the kids would have come up with a more creative name, but Chirp it was, for better or worse.

Luckily, I happened to have a friend who was a bird rehabilitator. I contacted them and was given some tips. They even coached me on how to make food for our little Chirp. To my great surprise, he ate it! It felt good to know that if he passed away quietly in the night, at least he wasn't cold and hungry.



We put him in a warm, safe place and said our goodnights. I reminded the kids of the great circle of life and how wildlife should be left wild, etc., and warned them not to get too attached to little Chirp. We all went to bed expecting the worst.

But it wasn't the worst! In the morning I found Chirp healthy and alert, eager for breakfast! Quickly I made up some more food and tried to feed him again. Since neither of us really knew what we were doing, the process was messy and a little frustrating. Still, we hit on something that worked and he seemed content. The kids were overjoyed when they woke to find he was still a part of our family.

Over the next days, we learned more about Chirp and he learned more about us. With advice from the rehabilitator, we got him some proper food and figured out the best “nest” situation for him. My husband and I took turns feeding him every hour all day, every day. In fact, Jack seemed to really have a knack for feeding the little guy. It turns out, doves can actually suck! We didn’t need a dropper to get food into him, we just needed to make a little cup with our hands and let Chirp suck from a pool of slushy food there.

But baby birds eat often. Whatever we did and wherever we went, Chirp had to be with us so we could keep up with his feedings. On days when I was unavailable, he went into work with my husband. When Jack wasn’t available, I kept Chirp in a little plastic tote and carried him around with me as I chauffeured the kids or went to church events. Chirp didn’t mind as long as the food kept coming. (Thankfully, birds sleep at night so we didn’t have to cover night feedings, as well. Daytime feedings were exhausting enough!)

At the start, Chirp was tiny, but he quickly began to take over our household. Everything revolved around his needs and his schedule. The cats had to stay outside. The kids had to keep quiet. The furniture in the living room had to move around to accommodate a small cage, then a larger cage, then an even larger cage. We discovered that tiny things can truly have great impact! Chirp didn’t even have feathers and already he was imparting deep wisdom.



As he grew, Chirp took over a larger part of our hearts—and our household. I had planned to release him back into the wild as soon as he was ready to fledge, but Chirp had other plans. He did not like the wide world outside! I

would carry him outside in a large rabbit cage so he could get used to the sights and sounds, but he was terrified. He thrashed around violently and I worried he would hurt himself. So, I decided to let him fledge in the house. We already had a parakeet so having a bird in the house was not completely unusual. Having one take over, however, was entirely new.

Chirp demanded free range in our home. Once again, things got moved around and the other creatures in the family had to adjust their daily activities for the sake of Chirp. He strutted around, hopping on counters and tables and people as if he owned the place. I suppose, in fact, he did.

I was worried about teaching him to fly. How could I do that? Our neurotic parakeet was not a good flyer and, to be honest, she and Chirp regarded each other with distain. If Chirp wasn't willing to go outside and interact with other birds like him, how would he learn? But he did! Chirp came pre-programmed for flight. No sooner did he sprout his nice feathers than he was swooping through the house. Thankfully we have an open floorplan and lots of furniture and tall cabinets that he could perch on.



He really bonded with us. Way more than the parakeet ever did! I had never intended to keep him as a pet, but we were the only family he knew and he had no plans for leaving us. I continued to bring in seeds and branches and vegetation from outside so he could learn real-life foraging skills, but the outdoors still frightened him. He didn't even like to look out the window.

He was convinced I was his mother, Jack was his father, and our two kids were his siblings who he sometimes squabbled with. He would dive-bomb my son to prove his dominance, he was tolerant of Joy, but he was sweet and loving to my husband and me. Most days, Chirp liked to sit on my head while I worked at the computer. I was his person and we had long, lengthy conversations about very deep subjects.



There was a potted plant on top of a cabinet and Chirp decided this was his "nest." The plant died, but the pot of dirt remained; Chirp loved to sit there and coo. Then he'd swoop through the house and surprise one of us by landing on our heads. At night we still locked him in a converted rabbit cage in our living room (for his own safety) but by day he roamed the house. I filled his rabbit cage with a tray of dirt and things from the outdoors for him to forage and, yes, occasionally I sprinkled birdseed on the carpet for him. He ruled the place, after all.

When I did dishes, Chirp liked to have his own bowl of water on the counter. He loved baths! Even when I wasn't doing dishes he would strut around the kitchen sink and try to figure out the faucet so he could get his own water.



Life with Chirp went on this way for more than a year. During the day the house was quiet—the kids were at school, Jack was at the office, and I was at my desk working. Chirp would sit on top of my head plucking gray hairs and cooing. My typing fascinated him and some days we battled for control of my keyboard. I would have to distract him by setting out a bowl of water for another bath. Eventually he got brave enough to sit by the window and tease the cats who were not allowed inside when Chirp was having free-range time, which was practically all the time.

As we approached Chirp's second birthday, I began to notice a change in his behavior. He was fully mature now, his cooing was full and beautiful, the bright pink feathers at the sides of his neck puffed and fluffed regularly as he showed himself off. He wanted to prove his prowess to everyone and he became more aggressive, more demanding. He claimed territories with a vengeance, now, and he did not like strangers entering his personal space.



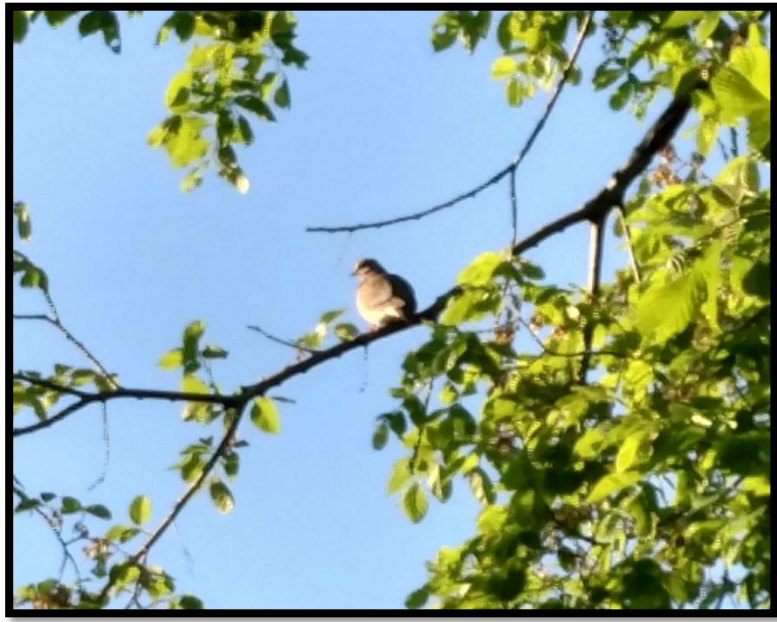
I was still his favorite person and he began to resent sharing me with anyone else. He especially had it in for my son who was also entering his teen years at this point. Jake could barely walk through the house without facing the wrath of Chirp. When he was not defending his territory, Chirp finally became interested in the outside. Now when I took him out in his cage he was a no longer a fluttering mass of terrified baby bird. He had become a curious adult, interested in watching and listening. I began converting the dog kennel outside to make a large, outdoor flight area where he could safely transition from living indoors to living outdoors before ultimately being set free. Chirp was finally hearing the call of the wild.

We all knew it wouldn't be long before we'd have to say good-bye. On May 9, 2015, Chirp decided we'd waited long enough. That was the day he chose the wild.



That morning Chirp had been particularly ruthless in his dive-bombing raids against my son. He was stalking the poor kid and wouldn't leave him alone. Plus, he'd been watching the front door with eagle eye, which isn't always easy for a dove. He was restless and uninterested in his usual routine. Even a bowl of water at the sink wasn't as tempting as the front window. It was clear his attitude toward the wide world outside had changed and our transition from tame to wild would not take much longer.

In fact, it took less time than I had planned. Rather than sticking with the program, Chirp took matters into his own hands—er, wings. When the front door opened that day, Chirp saw an opportunity. Instead of fluttering to hide when the door opened—as he usually did—this time Chirp went toward it. Without hesitation or doubt, he swooped outside, soaring up high into a tree, very near the same hickory tree where it all started for him, in fact.



The day was warm. It was sunny and absolutely gorgeous out there. I couldn't have chosen a better day to fully release him. I can't say it was easy, though. In that moment I realized that I had not chosen the day because, deep down, I really hadn't wanted to. I loved my little Chirpy and this good-bye was going to be hard for me. So, he chose the day, and he chose well.

I was torn between sadness and amazement. Wow, to watch him in free flight! It was beautiful. How could I possibly be sad? He radiated joy! He swooped and soared and circled and dipped. He flew so high and so gracefully—it was as if he'd been sailing over treetops all of his life. He was truly in his element, living the life he was meant to live. That was a sight I will never forget.

Thankfully, he didn't leave. He flew, but not away. He made grand arcs over the house. He visited every tree. He was having the time of his life and I was right there with him, on the ground.



We live in a rural area. Our house sits far back off the road and we have some land. We have a forest. We have a prairie. We have few neighbors. We have berries and fruit and seeds and nuts. The weather was wonderful. I knew Chirp would be okay.

I spent the day outside, just in case he got nervous and needed to land on my head and coo at me for reassurance. He didn't. He never left my sight, though, but any time I approached him he would move just a little farther away. He was wild now and he wanted me to know that.

I brought his cage and all his things outside. I put his plant pot up on a perch. If he needed the comforts of home, he had easy access to them. He didn't need them, though. He was ready for the wild.

All summer long I faithfully put plenty of birdseed out for him. He was always there to eat, too. He sat up in the trees and talked to us. He and my husband had their own little code—Jack would whistle, and Chirp would coo. His voice was distinctive. We had lived with those coos for so long that it was easy to recognize them among the other coos of the wild birds. Chirp apparently had an accent from living with humans.

He began to interact with the wild birds and that was fascinating. They knew he was different—some of them tried to avoid him. I worried that he would have trouble making friends, but then I started seeing him with the same two birds, day after day. He wasn't alone.



Chirp was always close by, but he made sure I knew he did not want to be coddled. He liked to keep me in his sight, but there was no more head-perching or shoulder-landing. That was a thing for needy babies, for pets. He was full grown, and he was WILD. And he was happy.

That whole first week of Chirp's freedom the weather was balmy—not too hot, not too cold, not windy or rainy. He had a whole week to just get used to

his new life. He adapted much faster than I expected! Everyday I hurried out to look for him and he was always there. He ate the birdseed I put out, he stayed near the house, but he was determined to be wild.

The seed I put out attracted other birds which was just what he needed. He became part of them. We started to notice that when he'd coo at us, he was adding different sounds, extra syllables or a slight tonal tweak. He still let us know it was him, but he was becoming more like the other doves. It was amazing and very fulfilling to know we had not only saved his life, but prepared him to actually go out and live a life.



That whole first year Chirp stayed close to home. He became part of a flock, the third member of a trio of young doves and he learned to model their behavior. There was never one minute he seemed to regret his decision to be free. I however, missed my little buddy like crazy. It was such a blessing that when I went outside, I could usually find him somewhere nearby. That was comforting.

As winter came on, I worried. I wondered if he would want to come back in, but he didn't. I found him sheltering in the barn with the goats one day, but he got angry when I tried to coax him to come to my shoulder. Apparently I insulted him to suggest he needed me. I didn't see him after that and I feared the worst.

However, as soon as it was spring, there he was! My brilliant Chirp must have migrated with his friends, then come back again when things warmed up. He would still come when I called, never close enough for me to touch him, but always close enough to make eye contact and to coo back and forth a bit, just so I would know it was him. When I would be out weeding the garden, he would perch nearby and coo. I always cooed back, though I sounded less and less like a real dove.

But Chirp was a real dove. He was still hanging out with his two friends, one bigger dove and one smaller dove. They spent that next summer in my trees and at my birdfeeders, doing their dove dances and being wild. By the end of that summer, I had to admit it was hard to tell Chirp from the other doves. He still did little things that let me recognize him now and then so I knew he was with them, but mostly he had become just another dove. As winter came on, he left again with his friends.



The following spring, I eagerly studied every dove who came by. It was 2017 by then. Would Chirp be back? Was that one Chirp? Or maybe he was that one? How would I know?

Then I saw the trio pecking at seed on the ground: one large dove, one small, and one familiar one in the middle. I called to him. Chirp looked up, then paused. The other two doves flew away, nervous at my presence. Chirp stood there, watching me. I moved toward him, speaking his name and some of the

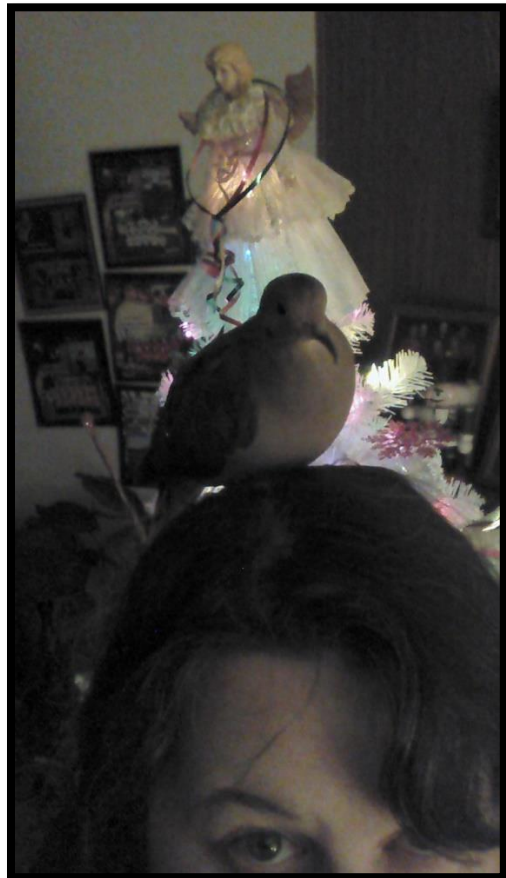
silly things I used to say to him. He listened, let me approach, and then at the last minute he went up into the tree to join his friends.

I knew beyond doubt that was my Chirp. He was letting me know it was him, but he wasn't mine anymore. He didn't fear me, he just didn't need me. And his friends didn't really like me.

That summer there were only a couple more times when I could be sure I saw Chirp. I knew he was there, but he had become so much like the wild doves that I couldn't tell them apart. He had become what he was supposed to be all along—truly wild.

Or maybe, being wild was when he lived in a rabbit cage and took baths in a bowl. Maybe it was the other doves who tamed him, who showed him who he truly was and what he could be. Maybe it all depends on which side of the door you live on, what is wild and what is not. That's more wisdom I got from Chirp.

We still have doves every year. They even nest in that hickory tree. For all I know, it could be Chirp. My husband goes out into the woods and gives his special whistle. Sometimes a dove answers. Sometimes it sounds exactly like Chirp. Sometimes I'm weeding the garden and a dove sits on a branch nearby, intently watching. Sometimes it makes eye contact and lets me approach, but only so far.



The average life span of a mourning dove in the wild is 2-5 years. I try not to do the math every spring. The good news is that the longest recorded lifespan of any wild land bird in North America is 31 years. That was a mourning dove. A 31-year-old wild mourning dove.

I like to think that my little Chirp is so very special, so amazing, that he might just break that record. I have no reason not to believe that he will, that every dove I see out there could possibly be him. And why not? It's not so very wild to imagine.

