

The Doctor is In

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A day in the life of the veterinary staff at the National Aviary is never dull. It is full of drama, challenges and rewards. Every day, Dr. Pilar Fish, Director of Veterinary Services and Animal Programs, and veterinary technician Amy Smith, Supervisor of Veterinary Services, care for more than 800 patients that weigh an average of 50 grams each — about the same as a large egg. This is no small feat for a duo that is on call 24 hours a day and performing work intended for six people. Despite their rigorous schedules, neither Dr. Fish nor Amy ever complains because they both love their work and genuinely care about each bird's well-being.

Dr. Fish's important role at the Aviary began about three years ago on a contractual basis that has since developed into a full-time position. As her responsibilities increased, so did the quality of healthcare for the vast collection. The veterinary staff now routinely provides grooming, practices preventive medicine, performs surgery and uses innovative procedures, all of which give the patients healthier lives and a better chance of recovery. In the past year, renovations to the Avian Veterinary and Research Hospital and the acquisition of specialized instruments and high-tech equipment impacted the Aviary in extraordinary ways. The staff is now able to better deal with any medical situations that arise.

Dr. Fish is quick to point out that caring for birds is entirely different from caring for mammals. The equipment and instruments must be tailored to a bird's small size. For instance, the hospital has two anesthesia machines, one for



Dr. Fish holds Helga, the Runner Duck, who underwent two very different surgeries in a six-month period.

larger birds and one for smaller birds. Amy Smith, a past volunteer and now a full-time staff member, acts as a bird's life support during each surgery. While Dr. Fish performs the surgery, Amy carefully pumps oxygen into the patient's lungs. The procedure appears easy, but requires constant monitoring.

The tiny bluebird on the cover is healing well in his lightweight cast.

Amy has to ensure the patient has an adequate amount of oxygen, but even a little too much can damage such tiny, fragile lungs. She breathes for the bird every 15-30 seconds, and most surgeries last two to four hours.

To perform procedures on these miniature patients, the staff uses instruments usually intended for microsurgery. Losing one drop of blood can be the difference between life and death for some birds. To prevent this, the hospital is equipped with an Ellman coagulation machine which uses radio waves to stop bleeding without burning the patients, as traditional cauterization might.

All animals sometimes break bones. However, birds break bones during normal activities more easily and more often because of their needle-thin legs. Birds in the wild do not have the same opportunity to recover as do the birds at the Aviary. Our birds have access to Vet-lite, a special light-weight, malleable bird cast. When placed in warm water, the cast material molds to exactly fit the broken part of the bird's body. Depending on the complexity of the circumstances, the bones will heal in about six weeks.

Medicating small birds is also a challenge since drugs are made for larger dogs and cats, not tiny birds. Amy dilutes the drugs and adds flavors for the birds. Since birds are so small and are very sensitive



Amy Smith entices Oscar, the Ocellated Turkey, to eat his medicine hidden inside a blueberry, his favorite treat.