

Dan Deuel (1946-2006)

By Cameron La Follette and Douglas Deur

Dan Deuel was the founder of Free Flight, an all-volunteer bird and marine wildlife rehabilitation program in Bandon, Oregon, that is responsible for saving hundreds of birds and coastal mammals on the south coast since 1976. Known as the “birdman of Bandon,” Deuel was admired for his courage and his commitment to nature.

Daniel Ray Deuel was born in Glendale, California, on July 22, 1946. From childhood, he was a gymnast and avid outdoorsman who was interested in wildlife protection, and he considered a career in wildlife management when he enrolled in Pierce Community College in Woodland Hills, California. His draft deferment during the Vietnam War was canceled when he took a semester off to work.

The U.S. Army recognized Deuel’s potential for making extended forays into remote terrain and trained him in counterintelligence. Arriving in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, Deuel provided combat intelligence for the First Air Cavalry Division, which took him into combat zones, often alone but for an interpreter. He was decorated with two Bronze Stars, an Air Medal for his acts of courage, and a Purple Heart for injuries he sustained while trying to carry a wounded soldier to safety. He served as a combat trainer upon his return to the United States, but became increasingly critical of the Vietnam War and left the army with an honorable discharge.

At age twenty-four, he settled with his wife in Santa Barbara, where he worked as a security chief for a department store and made plans to become a wildlife photographer. Riding home on his motorcycle after work one evening in 1971, he stopped by the side of the freeway to aid a fellow motorcyclist and was hit by a drunk driver. His legs and pelvis shattered and his aorta torn, Deuel was placed in an induced coma for three months at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, undergoing the first successful heart-lung bypass on a Bramson heart-lung machine, for which he is noted in medical literature. Through rehabilitation, Deuel learned, slowly and with difficulty, to walk again.

Living on disability payments and enrolled at Santa Barbara Community College, Deuel and his second wife traveled to Oregon and decided to buy a house in Bandon, a small town in Coos County noted for its rocky beaches and coastal scenery. Deuel appreciated Oregon’s environmental reputation and took a class on birds of prey at Southwestern Oregon Community College, followed by classes in ecology and private training and became a licensed bird rehabilitator.

Eager to distance himself from the war and to atone for his part in its atrocities, Deuel incorporated Free Flight South Coast Bird Rehabilitation in 1976, housed on the Bandon bluffs. Free Flight was run only by volunteers, trained and guided by Deuel, and was supported by community donations and local veterinarians. Nobody, including Deuel, ever received a salary, and Free Flight received no government money.

Over the years, Free Flight expanded the animals it cared for to include seal and sea lion pups, bear cubs, and a variety of birds, especially birds of prey such as hawks, eagles, and owls. Most of the birds had been injured by collision with the human world—shot, damaged by plastic or metal litter, entangled in fishing nets, or hit by cars. By the 1980s, Free Flight was treating as many as four hundred birds a year, with a survival rate of about 40 percent, a rate it sustained for the rest of its existence (the average nationwide was from 30 to 40 percent). The center focused on returning animals to their natural habitat whenever possible.

The organization’s name eventually changed to Free Flight Bird Rehabilitation and Education to emphasize Deuel’s extensive outreach efforts on behalf of wildlife. Occasionally, severely injured birds of prey or those unaccustomed to life in the wild featured in Deuel’s presentations at schools, colleges, zoos, service clubs, and tourist education groups. He frequently collaborated with the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology on both scientific education and wildlife recovery, and University of Oregon students served as Free Flight volunteers. Deuel’s message centered on the need to respect, protect, and conserve birds and wildlife.

Despite local controversies around Deuel's rehabilitation of sea lions and other fish-eating marine mammals, many south coast residents appreciated his commitment to injured wildlife, and they also admired his redemptive life story and his grit in dealing with his injuries that left him in frequent pain. Known regionally as the "birdman of Bandon," Deuel was featured on the cover of Mike Thoele's *Footprints Across Oregon* (1989), a book about Oregonians who made positive differences in their communities.

Deuel married his third wife, MeriJane, in 1995 and adopted her daughter. He died in 2006 from complications of his decades-old injuries. MeriJane Deuel ran Free Flight until 2013, when it closed.

For the southern Oregon coast, Dan Deuel left a legacy of the strength, courage, and commitment to healing the natural environment, even against seemingly insuperable odds.

Sources

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