Just before dawn on a still morning in April 2015, a crowd gathered on a beach in southern Tasmania. They watched in tense silence as a small animal shuffled across the sand. The animal, a penguin, had been the focus of nine months of care and cooperation to get to this moment – being released and sent back out into the world. I was privileged to be included in the farewell crew, and shared the jubilation and anxiety of the people around me, hoping that she would find the water and remember her path home.

Farewell, Miss Simpson

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In July 2014, bushwalkers at Cockle Creek, in the far south of Tasmania, witnessed a penguin being attacked by a dog. Upon being notified of the attack, a Parks and Wildlife ranger investigated and found the penguin wandering the shoreline, carrying serious wounds on its back, chest and foot.

With bright yellow eyebrows, this was not one of the little penguins common to the state but a Snares penguin, usually found on an island group hundreds of kilometres south of New Zealand. The extent of her injuries meant that the penguin was not waterproof, and therefore unable to survive a return to the cold waters.

After undergoing emergency surgery, Miss Simpson – as she became known – was transported to experienced seabird carer Lesley Kurek for rehabilitation. Lesley and her husband Richard have been looking after injured and orphaned wildlife for 30 years, the past 20 largely focusing on seabirds. For most of that time she has been one of the only seabird carers in the state, with little outside support.

Searching for more information about Miss Simpson, I visited Kurek at her home on the Tasman Peninsula. As I pull into their drive, Lesley and Richard came out onto their deck to greet me. I thanked Lesley for agreeing to speak to me and she replied with a casual wave of her hand. "Visitors are always welcome, especially when it's all for the care of wildlife," she said.

It's obvious Kurek enjoys looking after all creatures, including inquisitive humans.

Entering her living room I noticed a wall dotted with framed penguin photographs, a small selection of the animals she has nurtured and released over the years. Although keen to meet some of the animals in her care, when offered tea and homemade fruitcake and ushered towards her comfortable armchairs I offered no protest. The tour can wait.

Kurek keeps meticulous records and had the answers to my questions.

"When was Miss Simpson found?"

"July 17, 2014."

"What condition was she in?"

"Very unwell – only 2.217kg, which is very underweight for a Snares penguin. She wouldn't have survived on her own much longer if she hadn't been picked up."

After twenty years of doing this work, Lesley has seen a range of injuries to seabirds. By far the most common are dog attacks and, according to her records, they're getting more frequent. Tasmania's population is growing, more people have dogs, and canine residents are visiting the beaches near penguin colonies more frequently. This makes for a dangerous mix.

This is a topic that Lesley and Richard are passionate about and they talk at length on the many threats their patients face: entanglement in gillnets, ingestion of marine debris, four-wheel-drives crushing nests on beaches, diesel spills, algal blooms.

Dogs. Feral cats. People.

Creosote coating the pylons under piers can tar feathers and reduce waterproofing. Overfishing and dredging can destroy local prey stocks, meaning that penguins have to travel further and further from home to find food.

Hearing Lesley talk, I sensed a weariness about the seemingly overwhelming, and increasing, issues facing the wildlife she helps. Does she get tired of it all? Feel tempted to retire? Lesley shook her head – she is even more determined to care for animals in the face of increasing threats. However, her focus is beginning to shift towards mentoring younger wildlife carers to ensure her knowledge and experience are passed on. Tasmania is fortunate to have a network of volunteer carers that take on injured and orphaned wildlife until they can be rereleased, usually incurring the costs of veterinary treatment, food, equipment and enclosures themselves. However, the work can be exhausting and the number of experienced carers is far outweighed by the animals requiring their attention.

With tea and cake finished, we moved outside to look at Kurek's seabird sanctuary. Her property is dotted with aluminium aviaries and sandy-floored, timber-and-net enclosures. In a large enclosure surrounded by nylon netting, a family-sized, above-ground swimming pool sits squarely in the centre. Miss Simpson spent eight weeks here, gaining weight, recovering from infection, and letting her wounds heal. Highly stressed when she arrived, she snapped at anyone who came close. With patience, care and bribes of fresh fish, she settled into a calm routine of pushing her pontoon around the pool, looking for ways to hop out and explore the sand.

Lesley Kurek

However, with the wound on Miss Simpson's back not healing properly and the feathers refusing to regrow, Kurek realised the penguin would be in care much longer than originally thought. Faced with this, she decided to send Miss Simpson

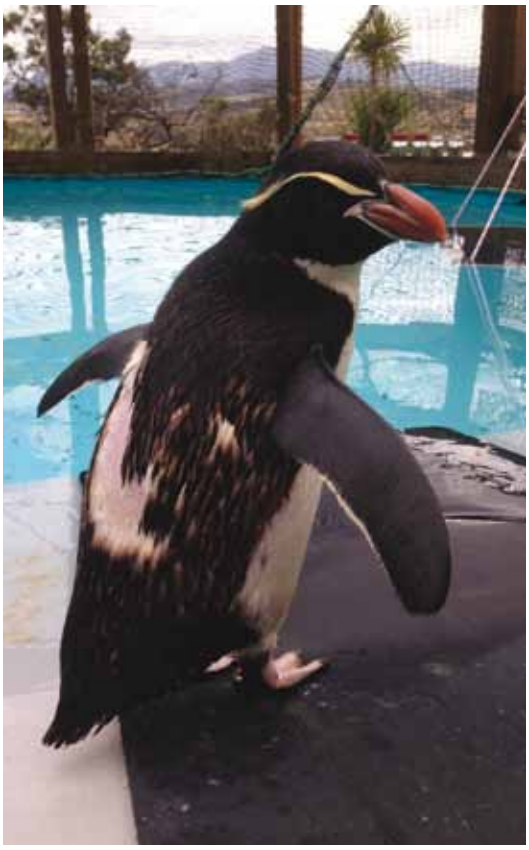
Miss Simpson

to Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary near Hobart where the pool and enclosure were larger, a team of keepers could share her care, and resources for veterinary treatment and food were available.

Once at Bonorong, the mammoth job of co-ordinating care for a penguin without a guaranteed future fell to sanctuary manager Petra Harris. She sought advice from multiple experts – vets, seabird researchers and staff at other rehabilitation centres – but conflicting opinions on the best steps forward made her task difficult. These experts suggested solutions that included more surgery; waiting until the following year when Miss Simpson would moult and hopefully regrow the feathers; and even euthanasia. Complicating matters, the longer seabirds are kept in captivity the more likely they are to develop secondary issues like bacterial infections of the feet, fungal infections of the respiratory tract, and stress preening behaviours.

When I interviewed Petra Harris, it had been some time since Miss Simpson had been brought into her care, and the stress was reflected in her face. Harris recounted the problems of receiving so much conflicting advice, but then said quietly, "One thing I have learned over the years is that patience is key with wildlife. You often don't have to rush into drastic measures."

Harris continued to seek guidance, and continued to rely at the same time on her own wealth of experience, and eventually came to a crucial decision: Miss Simpson would be given the opportunity to moult. For seven months, Harris and a small group of experienced


keepers spent long days keeping Miss Simpson comfortable – feeding her fresh fish, bathing her wound, providing interactive objects to occupy the intelligent animal; and endless cleaning of sand and swimming pool.

The decision proved to be the correct one. On cue, Miss Simpson went into moult – her previously sleek tuxedo of feathers became fluffy and patchy, falling out until only a fuzzy mane covered her shoulders and chest like a small marine lion. Checking anxiously each day, the keepers were relieved to see the problem feathers starting to regrow, their stubbly heads poking through the now-familiar bald patch on her back.

Miss Simpson was almost ready to go home. Beachgoers often see the sand, water and waves simply as a place of recreation but forget that it is also a habitat supporting dozens of species. Many seabirds come into care because of issues caused by humans: dog attacks, plastics, fishing lines and hooks, oil spills. The frustration for carers like Harris and Kurek is that these dangers can often be addressed with a little more effort and awareness on our part.

On the morning that she set Miss Simpson free, Petra Harris cartwheeled through a mixture of emotions: relief that the penguin was being released, worry that she wouldn't remember where to swim, anxiety about her safety. Wildlife carers dread getting "the call" after releasing an animal that it has been found reinjured, or worse.

With no breeze, the swell was gentle, the waves breaking in inch-high ripples. As the horizon slowly lightened, Miss Simpson stayed close to the crowd, as if feeling safer with "her people" than nearer the sea. Then, slowly, she zig-zagged towards the wet sand, first letting the cold water break across her feet and then flush her belly.

She dipped her beak for a quick drink, tasting the ocean for the first time in nine months.

As the tide swept out again, Miss Simpson suddenly dashed after it, trying to keep up with the receding water. Ploughing through small waves, she continued determinedly until deep enough to plunge in, head popping up and down. She stayed offshore for a few minutes as if taking in a last memory of the people who had been her company for so long, then ducked under the water and disappeared.

It is impossible to know what happened to Miss Simpson after she swam away but, for Petra Harris and Lesley Kurek, that's part of the magic. They like to think of her back on Snares Island telling her friends about her adventure, and the wonderful friends she made.

Grace Heathcote *is a project manager at Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary. After a childhood spent exploring the forests and beaches of Tasmania, she left in 2007 to study, work, and travel through Australia and overseas. The charm of Tasmania lured her home in 2014 and has continued to weave its magic for her ever since.*