

Magellana

Flies Home for Christmas



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Written by Jini Jones Vail

Lester, who was very much in love with his wife, Adriana, wanted to show her how much he cared by finding her a special, early, Christmas gift. They drove to New Haven in their home state of Connecticut to attend an auction of rare birds. The birds they went to see had recently been confiscated by the authorities after the truck in which they were being transported had run off the highway, landing in a ditch. Following the accident, it was discovered that the birds' owner had mistreated the lovely tropical birds, not giving them enough to eat or drink for the trip and by squeezing them into cages that were much too small. The ailing rare birds were temporarily housed by veterinarians and pet stores until they could be given up for auction to new owners who would give them the loving care they so desperately deserved.

Ever since Lester could remember, Adriana had a passion for birds, all kinds of birds. Together they had traveled the world to view unusual species of birds through the lens of a camera or a tripod bird scope. Lester had been associated with the migratory bird research section of the Smithsonian Institution for many years. It was not unusual for him to be sent to the Galapagos Islands or to Costa Rica to research the migratory habits of rare bird species. Since his wife shared this interest, she often accompanied him.

Now, in their retirement years, they were settling down to enjoy the beauty of their surroundings in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Lester thought it a fine idea to adopt a pair of these beautiful birds for his beloved wife. He knew how she had lovingly cared for birds with broken wings and that she could nurse injured and ailing birds back to health as few people could. So, that is how Lester and Adriana became the proud owners of a pair of Chilean Flamingos.

Adriana perused all the books and articles she could find on flamingos, particularly, Chilean flamingos. She discovered that flamingos are related to the heron and constitute the family of "Phoenicopteridae", in the order of "Ciconiiformes". More specifically, she found that her flamingos belonged to the smaller variety called "Phoenicoparrus andinus" which inhabit the coastal tip of Chile at the southernmost point of South America.

With her research done, Adriana then named her tropical birds. She called the male Zabar (pronounced Zay-bar) on a whim after her favorite New York deli. But, more germane to the subject, she named the female, Magellana (pronounced Ma-gell-ay-na), after the

famous Portuguese explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, who successfully navigated the Straits of Magellan (named after him of course!) near the southern tip of Chile in 1520. With the weather still fair in Connecticut that fall, Lester built a temporary cage for the two flamingos in their backyard, and Adriana quickly learned how to care for them. Soon the birds were robust and healthy again with a good measure of Adriana's T.L.C. (tender loving care).

As cold weather was around the corner, Lester and Adriana became concerned about how the tender flamingos, warm weather fowl by nature, would survive the coming winter living outdoors in the Litchfield Hills. She decided to board them over the winter with a group of geese, ducks, and swans at a large waterfowl sanctuary that conveniently adjoined their property. There they could find shelter from the wind and snow in the company of other birds.

By mid-December Magellana and Zabar were enjoying the mild early winter. The nights were cold, but the days were warm and sunny, much like early fall. The pair seemed to adapt well to their comfortable life at the sanctuary.

Since Adriana and Lester's large kitchen windows faced the sanctuary, at mealtime they delighted in watching the birds from their table, thereby maintaining a connection with their foundlings. On their daily walks they passed by Magellana and Zabar's enclosure, keeping an eye on their progress. Magellana's personality began to take form as she interacted with her mate and the other waterfowl. Her owners noticed that she often preferred the company of the mute swans to that of her mate, spending most of the day with them fishing for mollusks in the shallows around the edge of the pond. She also got along astoundingly well with the Canada geese. There did not seem to be any isolation or discrimination against her due to the pale pink color of her feathers and the long, slim "S" curve of her neck. Instead, the swans and the geese took her in as one of their own, while Zabar remained a little standoffish, slower to make friends.

The trees were nearly bare of leaves. Winter would soon be closing in. One day Lester talked to Amy, the director of the bird preserve, and together they came to an important decision. Lester and Amy decided, in order to make sure the two flamingos would remain in their new habitat all winter and not fly south with the last flight of geese, Amy would clip Magellana's and Zabar's wings over the weekend. It was not an easy decision, but one made with the safety of the birds in mind.

Saturday morning Amy, her ten-year old daughter, Sophia and eight-year-old son, Jamison, went out for their early morning walk in the sanctuary. They enjoyed their pre-

breakfast forays alone together observing the waterfowl at sunrise. As they strolled along the water's edge, pointing out their old friends, noticing which ones had already left for their winter-feeding grounds, they stopped on the small bridge which spanned the river inlet for a longer view. The mother and daughter, who always carried binoculars, held them up to scan the edges of the water through the reeds and tall grasses for the mute swans. They were nowhere in sight, but they were often gone for several days at a time. They would return from a nearby pond as they generally spent the winter in the north.

Just as Amy, Sophia, and Jamison completed their circle walk in the early morning stillness they passed the flamingo's enclosure near the old barn. The unimposing small barn housed Amy's office. As was their ritual, Amy would fix a hot cocoa for the children before getting down to the work of the day. However, at that moment, Amy wasn't even thinking of hot cocoa. Mentally she was preparing herself for the pinioning of the flamingos' wings, something she never relished doing. To rob a bird of flight always saddened her. Before she began her deskwork, she planned to cut off the last segment on the birds' wings, so they could no longer fly away. Trying to convince herself it was to be for the flamingos' own good, she neared the old barn. Suddenly Sophia shouted out fearfully, "Mom, they're gone! No, only Magellana's gone! There's Zabar behind the shelter! Well, at least he's still here, but where is Magellana?"

If you believe in mental telepathy, you might well say Magellana sensed the plan to clip her wings, for she had flown away, all by herself, just in the nick of time!

Amy went straight to Lester and Adriana to tell them of Magellana's disappearance. They were dumbfounded. Why would she take off alone? Where had she gone? Why did she leave Zabar behind. How had she known to leave the very day her wings were to be clipped? Too many questions with no answers. "One thing is sure," she said, "we must find Magellana!"

Word of Magellana's disappearance was circulated quickly by wildlife circles and nature conservancy groups, aided by the speed of email messages. Bird specialists in the Litchfield area were alerted to be on the lookout for a stray, pale pink, flamingo with black wing tips. Lester and Adriana had no idea in which direction to look, except to watch the waterways and wait for a call. No pun intended, but tweeters and twitters went out in every direction, even Facebook used the photo Amy posted to spread the alarm.

It was a week of tense waiting before a call came from the Hartford area, somewhat to the east. Magellana was spotted in a cove of the Connecticut River in the company of a flock of Canada geese and swans. With no time to spare, Amy picked up Lester and Adriana in

her Jeep, and together they drove to the bank of the Connecticut River.

Truth be told, Magellana just wanted to fly home for Christmas. It was her overriding desire to be home. Home was in her DNA. It could not be denied. Like all birds, fish, and humans, she wanted to be at home with her family for Christmas. It was as simple as that. But she was not able to communicate this to Zabar. Stubborn as he was, he was content to stay in his Litchfield enclosure with the other waterfowl. Yes, he loved Magellana, but to set out on a trip like she suggested to him, was crazy, when he could stay where he was, where food was plentiful. Unlike his mate, Zabar denied his instinct to fly to warm weather.

Sure enough, as Amy and Magellana's owners approached the Connecticut River, there was the errant flamingo in a small cove moving easily through the reeds on her long spindly legs looking for tasty shellfish for dinner. There was no mistake; it was Magellana. Even amidst the Canada geese, she stood out like a sore thumb with a pink Band-Aid. What a relief to find her! Obviously, she had been unhappy in her new home. Was she seeking a warmer place? Maybe she just wanted to be free! For the gathering crowd of onlookers, the biggest question was: What was a flamingo doing with a flock of Canada geese in Connecticut in December.

Luckily Amy had been near the phone that afternoon to help with the rescue. Since the arrival of the flamingos, she had taken a special interest in Magellana, although approaching her had been a challenge from the start. "That flamingo is an independent sort!" said Amy. "And she is proving it now!" Today Amy would summon all her knowledge of bird behavior to try and get Magellana to trust her - to try to get Magellana to let her come close enough to capture her.

Suffice it to say, Magellana was not about to let herself be caught. Instead, the moment Amy inched closer than 10-12 feet, Magellana gathered speed by running along the top of the water, gracefully lifting into the air on her beautiful pink wings with the black tips. She then landed again at a safe distance. Despite the use of high wader boots, a duck blind and even a small inflatable camouflage dinghy, Magellana continued to be elusive. Sophia and Jamison were downhearted and worried about Magellan's safety. They wanted nothing more than to see her back home with Zabar.

Then Magellana lifted off the river and slowly disappeared from sight. For the next few days there were no sightings reported. She clearly had her own agenda, and humans were not privy to it. The waiting was painful for the family who cared very much for her. By now the local newspapers had caught wind of the story and were keeping a running

account of the flyaway-flamingo. Even grandmothers followed the story like a soap opera, reading it aloud daily to their grandchildren. These concerned children in turn spread the story via the Internet, Facebook and twitter. Naturally like Sophia and Jamison, they were all praying for a happy ending to Magellana's unexpected flight by Christmas.

Time passed without a sighting. Then the silence was broken by a call from northern Vermont. A birder out for his daily walk with his head craned toward the sky in search of the last of the migrating hawks when he noticed something irregular. It was a flock of Canada Geese winging northward, "But," said the man, "one bird was slightly different in outline against the sky, and its color was not gray but pale pink!!!" The man thought he was seeing things. Pulling out his binoculars for a closer look, he found it was indeed a pink flamingo hitching a ride with the geese! He had not heard of the escaped flamingo but contacted his local Audubon Society to document the uncommon sighting. Being familiar with the ongoing story of Magellana, the Audubon member was elated to hear of her whereabouts. Birders in northern Vermont were alerted to her location and direction of her flight, but no further sightings were reported for two days.

Then, much to the astonishment of all, Magellana was seen further north in the Ottawa River near the Canadian capital city of Ottawa! Word spread swiftly back to her owners Adriana and Lester. Within a few hours Magellana's Connecticut family and sanctuary guardians were on the road to Ottawa. Amy sadly admitted to her daughter, Sophia, that their trip would most likely be futile since Magellana was not in the least interested in coming near them and secondly, none of her strategies had worked on the Connecticut River. Jamison added, "Mom, don't worry, we will find a way to bring her back to Connecticut."

While they were driving to Ottawa and talking about flamingo habits and the South American origin of the pair of flamingos, the reason for Magellana's flight north suddenly dawned on the young Sophia! It was an explanation of why Magellana had flown north rather than south as most migrating birds do in the fall on the North American Continent. "Of course," Sophia explained, as she related her revelation to her mom, her brother, Lester and Adriana, "we forgot that our little flamingo's home was at the southern tip of Chile in South America where the seasons are just the reverse of ours!"

Sophia and Jamison's Montessori School classes were keen on bird watching and studied habits of different bird species world-wide, and Sophia knew that in South America birds behaved differently. Sophia went on to say: "In the fall her instinct told her to fly north to the warmer climate of the Andes mountains where her breed of flamingos spends the

winter, thus her Latin name, *phoenicoparrus andinus*! Andinus is Latin for “of for Andes!” Yes!! Magellana’s instincts had her thinking that she was still in her own home range. Her instinct was correct; only her point of departure was off! She was no longer in the southern hemisphere, but the northern hemisphere where the seasons are the opposite.

So, when she saw a flock of geese flying north, which was strange, even in Connecticut at this time, she had a sudden compelling urge to join them. And that is how she ended up in Ottawa. Fortunately, she had the sense to stop there when the cold temperatures prevented her from continuing to migrate north. All in all, she had migrated some 400 miles north of her new home in Connecticut! She must be so confused now, thought Amy! Instead of finding warmer weather as she flew north as was the custom of her breed in South America, the further north she flew, the colder and colder it became. “Oh,” intoned Amy, “I do hope we meet with a Canadian ornithological team that can outsmart that little flamingo lady!”

As the ice on the Ottawa River was closing in, and Christmas was only a week away, the Ottawa newspapers took up the account of Magellana’s continued evasive behavior. The Canadian birders put their heads together hoping to come up with a method of catching the errant Magellana.

Upon arriving in Ottawa, the Connecticut owners plus Amy, Sophia, and Jamison, found the team of Canadian birders by the Ottawa River where Magellana had last been spotted. They and the Ottawa team waited in the bitter wind discussing their few options as the sun began to sink below the city skyline. Sophia had been praying that Magellana would be home for Christmas. She told her mom that all she wanted for Christmas that year was the safe return of the Magellana, and nothing else mattered. In dismissal spirits, the crew left the river for the night.

The leader of the Canadian team invited the Connecticut four to spend the night in her spacious apartment high up on Springfield Street overlooking the city. They were all glad to find warmth and rest after a long, stressful day. Sophia and Jamison snuggled up with their mom under a Swiss feather puff. Sophia had a tear in her eye and a silent prayer on her lips as she floated off to sleep in her mother’s arms.

They awoke early. By 8 AM they were on the river again with little hope that Magellana had survived the brutally cold Canadian night. The other Canadian team members were already stretching the net and breaking ice in a likely spot where they had last seen her. Lester and Adriana huddled together against the frigid temperatures and could not offer much in the form of advice to the waiting team.

After two hours most everyone took a much-needed coffee break in a nearby restaurant. The helpers were tired and worn down after the long search, the many near misses, and disappointments of the last several days. During the break Amy was thinking that surely the fragile tropical bird could not hold out much longer under such difficult circumstances. Surely, she conjectured, right now, wherever she was, Magellana must be battling a severe case of an instinct at cross purposes. Normally Amy had an uncanny way of thinking like a bird, but these trying conditions were beyond all reason.

Meanwhile, Magellana's heart was telling her to continue north to find warmth, food, and comfort. Yet she found nothing but colder winds and more ice. Flying northward had always brought the desired result in her youth as she migrated north every fall with her parents. What was she doing differently now?

Maybe today, if Magellana had survived the night, she would come to her senses and at least return to the place where she had found food two days ago. Amy and the others banked on this hope. They had no choice but to wait.

Back on the riverbank despite misgivings from Amy, the would-be rescuers insisted on bringing three things with them: seven pink plastic lawn flamingos, a huge mirror, and an enormous net on a long stick. Would they ever get a chance to use these three teasers?

Adriana and Lester talked quietly, trying to pass the time as the afternoon turned into hours. The lady standing next to Adriana relayed the weather report from her iPhone: "temperatures dropping severely this evening with a penetrating wind chill expected". Hope of a merry Christmas this year was fading fast. Amy pulled Sophia's muffler up over her nose and tied the string on Jamison's hood tightly under his chin.

After what seemed like they had waited and watched forever, a team member pointed toward the sky above the river and shouted, "Here she comes; it looks like Magellana, and she is alone. She is returning. We're in luck... I mean, she's in luck!" A hush came over the crowd as the lone flamingo slid to a stop on the thin ice. She only weighed a few pounds, so the ice held her.

Now to use the teasers. Well, you know how Magellana reacted to each of these! First, she never did like to fraternize with her own kind, so the seven pink, plastic, lawn flamingos did not attract her in the least. Secondly, the mirror was meant to trick her into thinking her mate, Zabar, had flown in to pay her a visit. The flat reflective image of herself did not fool her for a moment. The first two lures were a dismal failure. Thirdly

they tried the net.

It proved to be unwieldy and useless compared to her clever sidestepping, always keeping just out of reach. In a word, once again Magellana was becoming more adept at evading her captors. After all, her odyssey was already well into its second week!! She still refuses to surrender!

By now the weather and daylight hours were running out on the bird with a travel bug. People of all ages in America and now, Canada were worried that with even one more night of freezing temperatures her food supply would be frozen over, and her spindly legs which bent backward at the knee might be frozen in!!

The situation was becoming delicate, even frantic. Then as the first full day in Ottawa finished, Magellana took to the skies once again. That night youngsters began asking their fathers to call their local news desks asking for an update on the now famous bird. Children from Australia to the Caribbean were hanging by their Internet waiting to hear the outcome of the now-beloved three-pound newsmaker flamingo. It had to be a first for a Chilean flamingo to find such notoriety across the world.

Once again, with no luck cornering Magellana, the would-be rescuers called it a night as the poor little flamingo flew away and out of sight.

On the morning of the second full day in Ottawa, because of the dipping temperatures, Adriana, Lester, Amy, Sophia, and Jamison were summoned very early to meet local ornithologists at the river where Magellana was last seen the previous evening. Amy had worked on a new plan to capture Magellana should they be lucky enough to find her alive on the icy river. She turned on the car radio as they approached the river. The morning news was not promising for the report was that Magellana had flown away just as the crowd of onlookers was pulling into the parking lot by the river where she was to meet the birders that day. Amy parked the car and headed for the riverbank with Adriana, Lester, Sophia, and Jamison close behind.

Everyone to whom they spoke was terribly worried concerning Magellana's safety. Looking around they were impressed by the stark beauty of the partially frozen river already dotted with early morning skaters. Christmas trees and decorations were everywhere in the capital city.

But this was not a sightseeing trip. Amy found the leader of the Ottawa search team that by now numbered at least one hundred strong! Together they huddled on the riverbank,

collars up around their ears as a wind shield, everyone said a silent prayer that the runaway flamingo would return to her last feeding place.

Today Amy would implement her last-ditch plan. It was a simple one. It all depended on the bird coming back to this spot. She had asked two young men to bring along a ten-foot plank, wide enough to enable her to crawl out over the ice to retrieve Magellana. The idea had come to her in the car on the drive north. They were bringing the piece of wood from the back of a pick-up truck and heading for the riverbank when the call went up. Apparently, during that morning's coffee break Magellana had decided to put in another appearance! Hooray!

Jamison was the first of the Connecticut group to see Magellana standing there next to the net. She seemed to appear out of thin air. There she was about a board's length from shore. The ice wasn't all that solid where she was standing. The pink-feathered wanderer was quivering from exposure, exhaustion, and lack of nourishment.

Amy quietly motioned to the two men to push the piece of wood slowly out onto the ice. When they did, she carefully began shifting her weight onto the makeshift bridge toward Magellana. As she did so, the shivering bird retreated a few steps. She seemed reticent but a tad more willing than she'd been when Amy last saw her. At least she didn't fly away. Did she sense her own increasing plight and finally realize the humans meant no harm? With her next step on the board Amy's weight caused the ice to crack. Amy stepped back quickly and whispered something to an expectant Sophia.

As the others looked on with great anticipation, photographers were carefully moving in for what could either end in a disaster or a great rescue. Cold and exhausted onlookers and rescuers were all holding their breath. This time it was a smaller rescuer, Sophia, who stepped gingerly onto the board and began to inch out to Magellana, talking softly to her as she went. Slowly Magellana placed first one foot, then two on the far end of board as if to approach Sophia. Jamison held his breath!

Suddenly there was a loud crack in the ice at the shore end; the board dipped into the black water just far enough to throw the flamingo off balance, so she fell into Sophia's open arms. One very cold, very hungry Magellana had surrendered to one of the youngest members of the rescue team. Sophia held her close in her arms and carried her off the board through the icy water back to the shore. Tears were streaking down her cheeks for joy! She didn't even feel the freezing water around her ankles. In fact, she was numb but happy beyond belief! A great cheer went up for the tiny flamingo and the small girl hero who saved her from certain death that day on the Ottawa River in the middle of

December. Christmas was looking better every minute!

Instantaneously both Magellana and her young rescuers, Sophia and Jamison, became the darlings of the Internet as the good news spread over the keyboards on twitter and Facebook, from house to house and town to town all over the world. The clicking of computer keyboards could be heard from Canada to Connecticut and as far away as China, reassuring young and old alike of the eternal brotherhood of animals and humankind. Who ever said there was never any good news to tell?

Amy, Sophia, and Jamison remained in Ottawa for the few days it took until Magellana was ready to travel home to Litchfield. After a short period of rest and recuperation, the errant flamingo was ready to travel. A kind, caring, birder from Ottawa offered to fly Magellana, Amy, Sophia, and Jamison back home to Connecticut just in time for Christmas.

Meanwhile a very thankful Lester and Adriana drove back to Connecticut to prepare for the return of the now famous bird. Christmas trees were decorated at the Waterfowl Sanctuary and Christmas gifts were bought. Finally all was in readiness for the triumphal arrival of Magellana. The town turned out to welcome them home with garlands of sparkling twinkling lights and loads of Magellana's favorite flamingo food.

Zabar appeared genuinely pleased to greet his long-lost mate as she walked into the enclosure at the Wildlife Sanctuary. Now that their precious prodigal flamingo was safe and sound, Lester and Adriana were very relieved indeed. But Sophia was the happiest of all. Her Christmas wish had been answered!

Postscript:

Rumors spread that soon the greatest gift possible would be given to Magellana and her patient mate, Zabar. There would be no clipping of wings, and what's more, a Lear jet had been donated by a Connecticut admirer to fly both flamingos back to their homeland on the southernmost tip of Chile. There they would join their own kind where it was perfectly normal to fly north in the fall to the warm Andes Mountains and south in the spring to migrate to the Straits of Magellan.

Does that name sound familiar?

Jini Jones Vail, written December 1997

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From a true story. T.B.T.G.



Photo from inaturalist.org. <https://www.inaturalist.org/blog/25589-a-chilean-flamingo-and-an-america-flamingo-meet-in-mexico-observation-of-the-week-6-18-19>