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PROLOGUE

Oh, Deer

SOMETIMES YOU GET lucky and the caller gives you accurate information so you can make an educated assessment of the situation and give the poor creature caught at the sharp end of the emergency a fighting chance. In any rescue there are always variables so instinct and experience play a big part. I'm certainly no Dr Dolittle but I do get a sense of what most of the animals I rescue are feeling by their body language and the way they behave. This empathy is the difference between a successful outcome or blundering into a situation, spooking an animal into a panic and creating even more danger for it.

When the caller is an animal expert it makes the job easier because usually they know what they are talking about, as was the case one sunny day in 2013 when the phone in the office rang and the RSPCA was on the other end of the line.

‘It’s a roe deer and it’s trapped in a car park . . . in a school . . . in the middle of south London,’ the guy explained. ‘It’s got some kind of facial injury. There is a lot of blood. The police are here too and the deer is really panicked. The school is near a main road and the kids have been kept inside but I don’t know how long it will stay here. If it gets out it could cause a major accident.’

I shuddered to think of the carnage that an adult deer would cause on a busy London road.

‘I’m on my way. Let me know if the situation changes,’ I told the caller.

Then, with the familiar adrenaline buzz firing my synapses, I jumped out my chair and ran over to the store room to grab the equipment we’d need for the rescue. Top of the list was the huge net we kept for large, fast animals. If the deer was going to bolt from wherever it was, we would need something to stop it getting onto the road.

‘Lucy,’ I yelled. ‘Emergency!’

By the time I got to the car Wildlife Aid’s trusty vet nurse was waiting along with one of our volunteers who was also acting as cameraman. I knew I would need an experienced team and I called my number-two rescuer, Sean, who lived nearby and was every bit as good as I was. We loaded up the Volvo and sped out of the gates. Less than four minutes had elapsed since I’d hung up. I started to work things out in my head. Deer rescues were tricky: the animals are big, fast and unpredictable. To successfully corner and catch a deer you need enough people to close off all the exits. There were three of us in the car, at least one RSPCA officer and

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some police officers. Hopefully that would be enough.

No two rescues are the same and every rescue presents its own special set of circumstances. Each species has its own behavioural traits and quirks and each individual animal has its own personality. Some are bold and aggressive, some are frightened and shy. Very rarely, some seem to know that you are there to help and passively allow you to do what you need to do in order to save them.

Deer are tricky customers, which is why the RSPCA called us. They are terrified of man and want to get away from you. You need to be extremely careful and extremely quick when the capture moment presents itself. You can't afford mistakes, both for the sake of the deer and for the sake of the rescuer. Antlers hurt, believe me. I've been caught twice by them, once in the forehead and once in the neck. You also have to watch their hooves because a deer can jump several feet from standing and has a hell of a lot of latent energy stored in its legs. One kick can easily rupture an organ.

Deer can also cause all kinds of harm to themselves when they are in flight mode. They are prone to stress and shock and roe deer are the only deer that can develop a condition called capture myopathy, which is an acute condition with symptoms varying from muscle stiffness to paralysis, respiratory problems and cardiac arrest. They can literally get scared to death.

I arrived at the school and was met by two RSPCA officers in uniform: a man and a woman. The school was on lock-down and excited faces stared out of each window. I scanned the L-shaped car park and spied the deer – a roe

buck with large antlers – cowering behind a car at one end of it. It was panting, its flanks were streaked with sweat and speckled with blood from a deep wound in its mouth. I couldn't see the extent of the injury but even from a distance the amount of blood suggested it was serious.

There were around twenty cars parked in spaces with enough room around them for the deer to dart through, which meant it would be hard to catch. The car park was bordered on several sides by the brick school buildings and also by the playground, which was enclosed by a high chain-link fence, so while there was room for the animal to run around, there was only one exit – the opening to the road. There were borders and some trees on the fringes of the car park too.

The male RSPCA officer introduced himself.

'What's the situation and why haven't you gone for it?' I asked. 'You are worrying me now.' He explained that he had sought advice from the agency Natural England who had told him simply to catch and release the deer but that the police had wisely vetoed the plan in case the release caused a traffic accident. Bemused, I asked whether English Nature had given any tips on how they assumed the deer would be caught in the first place.

'Do you just say "come here, deer", put it in the car and drive off?' I joked.

I knew we needed to get the deer in a position where it would have no option but to run through the net. Once caught I could grab it, sedate it and then gauge what medical attention was needed. Before any of that happened,