

Waypoint
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Outdoor Canada
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Have you ever noticed that the some of the sweetest moments of hunting and fishing trips have nothing to do with the actual catch or kill?

Oh sure, it's a great feeling to hook a bruiser brown trout on a tiny dry fly, or to find a secret hole that produces walleye after chunky walleye.

And it's truly a treat to catch a wide-racked whitetail buck flat-footed, bust a cackling cock pheasant bursting from a willow patch, or bear down on a flock of emerald-headed mallards dropping into your decoys.

But often it's the other things that happen while we hunt and fish that provide us with those special memories that never go away, and in fact improve with age. These outdoor versions of Hallmark Moments are gifts that keep on giving, enriching our lives and those with whom we've shared them.

That notion has struck me many times in my 40-plus years afield, but never as poignantly as it did last November, while deer hunting in west-central Alberta.

It was a clear morning with the temperature pushing minus 30. Snow lay deep on the fields and in the woods surrounding my friend Jim's log house beside the Clearwater River.

Returning to the house in late morning after a few chilly hours of chasing elusive deer, we were passing an open field when Jim suddenly told me to stop the vehicle.

"There's something out in that field," he said.

Even with binoculars, at first we couldn't identify the dark frost-coated mound on the snow just 10 paces from the road. Then it raised its black-faced head with a snake-like, white-throated neck and peered our way with blood-red eyes.

Jim and I exchanged incredulous looks.

We knew it was a western grebe, a water bird that should have left Alberta for Mexico or other warmer climes along the Pacific coast at least a month ago. It certainly shouldn't be sitting in a snow-covered field in deep-freeze weather, a mile from the nearest open water.

Left where it was, the bird faced certain death. Grebes can't take off from land; they need to run atop water to get up enough speed to take flight. Clearly, this bird needed help to survive.

The grebe didn't move or make a sound as we approached. Broad wing and talon marks in the snow nearby told of an overnight drama – perhaps a hungry great horned owl or bald eagle rebuffed by the grebe's darting stiletto-like yellow bill.

Jim gently placed his blaze-orange coat over the bird and we raced back to the van.

After unwrapping the bird at the house, we immediately saw the cause of its dilemma. It was entangled in two feet of heavy monofilament fishing line attached to a large fish hook firmly imbedded in its downy breast. No wonder it couldn't fly.

The bird was unusually calm in Jim's hands as I detached the hook and removed the line. When we lay it on the snowy driveway, the grebe immediately started preening itself in the sunlight, appearing none the worse for wear.

Jim and I marveled at the bird's plumage – and its calm courage after such a harrowing ordeal. We talked of the challenges facing wild creatures, some natural and others – like the hook and line – not at all. We spoke of the fragility of life, and were in awe of this bird's determination to migrate despite its pain and man-made handicap.

Minutes later, we walked down to the river, already frozen along the edges and with many chunks of ice flowing downstream. When Jim carefully placed the grebe on the ice, it immediately scuttled the few feet to open water.

As soon as it started swimming, it dove time and time again, seemingly reveling in its freedom. If a bird can show happiness, this one was clearly ecstatic.

We watched quietly until the grebe disappeared around a bend. And as we followed the trail back to the house, Jim and I both expressed hope for its safe journey south.

These mighty deer hunters, who just a few short hours before were intent on killing a deer, instead had given a reprieve to a seemingly doomed bird that just wouldn't give up.

But its gift to us was so much greater.