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## Lucky Stripes

Noah's Ark rescues creatures great and small—including one lost zebra

By Paige Williams

In a city with six interstates, all sorts of stuff tends to turn up on the roadside—abandoned vehicles and bounced luggage are the least of it. There's also a mysterious class of discoveries you cannot even imagine or, at first, explain. An extreme example: In the late nineties on westbound I-20 in Douglas County, police answering a call about an unattended car found fragments of a female body scattered along the roadside. Authorities eventually closed that whodunit—a hit-and-run during a rainstorm, the young woman's body struck by multiple vehicles—but other mysteries go unsolved.

An April morning. A Tuesday in 2008. On the I-75 overpass at exit 201 in Henry County, the blue lights of a parked police cruiser flash as Lieutenant Matt Garrison of the Butts County Sheriff's Office directs traffic around a tow truck and a disabled vehicle. Four huge truck stops are clustered at the top of exit 201—it's like a little trucker village, with almost everything a long-distance traveler might need: gasoline, overnight parking, private showers, truck scales, convenience stores, laundry facilities, drivers lounges, RV dump stations, restaurants, and a truck wash. Untold thousands of travelers stop at exit 201 each year as they journey to or from anywhere along the 1,787-mile interstate, which starts in Hialeah, Florida, just north of Miami, and runs through Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio, ending at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, on the Canadian border. As Lieutenant Garrison works, a woman in an RV rolls past, lowers her window, and says, "Excuse me, but there's a zebra down there."

Sure enough, at the foot of the ramp, a zebra stands on the overgrown shoulder in the midmorning sun. The grass is knee-high to a human there, and thick, and the zebra is calmly grazing. He's about the size of one of those ponies kids ride at petting zoos, and he's wearing a blue lead rope attached to a blue halter, but nothing about his appearance suggests where he came from or when, or how he had appeared out of nowhere on the side of a major highway.

A small crowd of authorities soon gathers, including wildlife biologists and other agents summoned from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The zebra doesn't try to run, but he doesn't want anyone touching him, either. If someone takes two steps toward him, the zebra takes two steps back. Garrison and a colleague grab the bridle. Then they start to walk him. Which is when they notice the blood.

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"This is just gonna be a big April Fool's joke," Jama Hedgecoth says when the zebra call comes.



Photos by Ken Schneiderman



The founder, director, and longtime owner of Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center in nearby Locust Grove has been getting crank calls for thirty years. Some of the jokers think they are so funny, and others have the sense of a lug nut. Countless times Jama has geared up with cages and dart guns only to discover the bobcat in the cul-de-sac is just a really big cat; the cougars on a playground are in fact yellow Labs; the bear cub running down the highway is a Chow puppy.

Jama nevertheless grabs a pillowcase and some pantyhose, the pillowcase for covering a frightened animal's head and the hose for gently tying restless legs. She removes the rear seat of the company van to make a holding area and sets out on the ten-mile drive to exit 201.

The DNR boys will be relieved to see her. Jama regularly takes animals off their hands, whether the creatures were confiscated in drug raids or abuse cases or from unlicensed owners. Once, when police raided a house—well, let's just put it this way: The only thing worse than finding a fifteen-foot snake in a house is finding a fifteen-foot snake skin. The deputies quickly departed the residence and called in Jama, whom they know on sight: tall, with the deeply tanned face of an outdoorswoman, steel-gray hair, and almost startling blue eyes. As the mammoth men with sidearms watched from a safe and snake-free distance, Jama marched in to hunt reptile.

She didn't find the snake. Had she found it, she would have put it with the boa and the python and the other snakes at Noah's Ark. The only thing she might say no to these days, in this tough economy, are horses; she already has more than eighty in her pasture and cannot afford another mouth to feed. Her wildlife center, a nonprofit, operates entirely on donations, and Jama and her husband of thirty-eight years, Charles "Pop" Hedgecoth Sr., have to set boundaries.

With her is their oldest son, Charlie, a big, friendly guy in his mid-thirties, and Allison Felker, a pretty, brown-eyed volunteer in her mid-twenties. At six foot two and more than 200 pounds, with blue eyes and dimples, Charlie is like a brown bear with a lollipop. He is divorced, with two children from his first marriage, plus a daughter he adopted as a baby, to raise as a single father. He lives in a house adjacent to the 250 pastured and forested acres that make up Noah's Ark and the place where he grew up helping Jama and Pop care for everything from lions and leopards and tigers and bears to emus and monkeys and odd little goats. Charlie has his parents' gift for communicating with animals, and he can toss around feedsacks and hay bales like they're pillows. When county judges send misdemeanor inmates such as check bouncers and DUI offenders to work off their fines and sentences at Noah's Ark, Charlie is the one who drives them back and forth to what he calls the "Henry Hilton," which is a nicer way of saying the Henry County Jail.

Lately, Jama has noticed Charlie spending time casually with Allison, who is mature for her age and shows a sort of Jama-like mettle. "Al," as they call her, grew up in Buckhead and is a tiny thing but can outwork most men. Noticing Charlie and Allison's shared instinct for animals and children, Jama has been hoping—praying, actually—that the two are right for each other. "You should ask her out," she once told Charlie. He said no—he didn't want to ruin the friendship.

But it's spring. And it's hard to say no to love in the spring. In the animal kingdom, spring is the time for birth, when creatures are more likely to survive because there's newly abundant food and fresh water. Spring brings gifts of life.

From the moment Jama sees the zebra, the word "no" never occurs to her. He is probably two or three months old and dazed and traumatized. He has injuries all over his body, including a nasty, gaping gash across his rear end, beneath his tail. He allowed the officers to take his lead and now he lets them load him into the back of Jama's van. En route to Noah's Ark, Jama calls Karen Thomas, the volunteer veterinarian for the rescue and a longtime small-animal vet in Riverdale. By now it is around noon, and Doc T, as everyone calls her, is having lunch. When Jama tells her she just picked up a zebra, Doc T mishears.

"A beaver?" Doc T answers, wondering why Jama would call so excitedly.

"No," Jama says. "A zebra."

Which is, of course, a whole other thing.

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Doc t counts more than a hundred scrapes and cuts, the sort of "road rash" found in cats and dogs that have been hit and rolled by a car. Two of the zebra's front teeth have been knocked out, leaving an ugly gouge in his gums. The bloody twelve-inch cut across his rear shows like a red belt of bulging meat across his black-and-white coat, growing more prone to infection by the



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Doc T has tended to squirrels, dogs, cats, goats, pigs, miniature horses, and birds in her twenty years of treating and rehabilitating animals at Noah's Ark. She has neutered deer, pinned the broken leg of a Canada goose, and mended the cracked shells of a tortoise and snapping turtles. She has extracted monkey teeth and transfused a cougar. She has amputated the crushed wing of a rare golden eagle, carefully saving every stray feather to send to the federal government, as required by law. She has carefully—very carefully—sedated a Himalayan bear named Susie. Exotic animals aren't her vocation, but they are her thrill—early in her studies, Doc T wanted to become a zoo vet—and now here in the Noah's Ark barn stands a zebra. An abandoned, motherless, horribly injured little zebra.

The cops at exit 201 referred to him as evidence, so that's what Jama and the others are calling him: Evidence. Not a particularly melodious name and certainly not a name befitting one of the most recognizable and exalted animals in existence, but his name nonetheless. Doc T needs to sedate Evidence in order to work on him, but this is new to her. Zebras may be equines, like horses, but they're more than "a horse with stripes"—different in size (smaller) and temperament (aggressive and dangerous as adults). She calls the exotic-animal vets at the University of Georgia; they are out. She rings up a large-animal vet who lives nearby, but he is out. She turns to a book about exotic animals, studies weights and dosages, and wings it.

She administers a partial dose of tranquilizer into Evidence's hindquarters, and when he gets woozy she gives the rest via IV. Once he's laid out on some hay bales, she cleans his wounds and stitches up the gash and applies antibiotics. Evidence looks pretty good now, and Doc T thinks, "Cool."

Jama and Allison sit with Evidence as he sleeps and talk about what happened to him. Their best guess: He fell out of a slow-moving trailer as the driver entered the ramp to exit 201, then was hit by a car and left for dead. This is not implausible. Trailers transport animals up and down

I-75 all the time from Florida—where it's legal to own all kinds of exotic animals not legal in other states—and cut over to Missouri, home of Lolli Brothers Livestock Market, one of the world's oldest and largest auctioneers of exotics. At the very moment that Evidence lies injured, a four-day auction is under way at Lolli, with zebras scheduled for sale in the coming hours.

Dealers and buyers from around the world attend Lolli sales. Such auctions cater largely to private collectors and operators of private zoos and wildlife preserves. If you are in the market for a pair of blue capped finches or a giant three-horned chameleon or a wildebeest or a lowly peafowl, you can probably find it at Lolli. But depending on where you live, you had better be licensed for ownership. Georgia's laws are stricter than those of other states, particularly Florida and Alabama. Here in Georgia, no, you may not have a tiger cub as your gang mascot, and you may not put a bear in a pen in your yard and invite friends over to see it.

As Evidence sleeps off his anesthetic, Lolli, in Missouri, is gearing up to sell everything from cockatoos to rock hyraxes to sixty-two head of camel to a baby Russian hog to a male zedonk (a zebra-donkey hybrid) to a baby giraffe to water buffalo. The zebras will end up selling for between \$3,100 and \$10,000.

Jama has a lot of angry questions. Number one: If you are missing a baby zebra, do you not care enough to find out what happened to it? The fact that no one has claimed Evidence suggests he was owned illegally or that the owners or transporters know he is injured and can't deal with the medical bills. Number two: What kind of jackass runs over a zebra and does nothing about it? "Animals are not disposable," she thinks. "You don't just discard an animal because it's hurt and you can't afford it, just because it doesn't fit into your budget."

To her, the sequence of events hardly matters anymore. Evidence is hers now. "Once you give me an animal, hell will freeze over before you get him back," she likes to say.

Jama is the Mother Hubbard of animals. Her devotion to them began as a child. She couldn't stand the sight of an injured creature and as young as age four started taking in all kinds of animals, winged and four-legged. She nurtured them back to health, then found them homes. Her parents were traveling preachers, though, and Jama's compulsion to help animals didn't fit with the world of people who live on the road. They told her to be patient—someday she would live in a place where she could care for as many animals as she wanted. When that day came, Jama vowed, she'd let anybody and everybody visit her animals—for free. During a mission trip to Mexico, Jama visited an orphanage and realized she would one day like to nurture children, as well.

She and Pop opened Noah's Ark in 1978, on a small Ellenwood farm that they eventually outgrew. They moved the Ark to Locust Grove in 1990, to rolling fields and woods paid for in part by a benefactor who wants to remain anonymous. There, Jama is both the Noah's Ark figurehead and something of a patron saint to creatures great and small. To her, everything is beautiful. She

smooches llamas on the lips. She once carried two near-death baby lemurs in a fanny pack and fed them by eyedropper every hour on the hour for months until they were well. She can subdue a 300-pound ostrich one minute and sit down to a white-tablecloth luncheon with Georgia first lady Mary Perdue the next. True to her childhood vow, she doesn't charge a penny. "It's blessed ground," Allison has said. "The work we do, the dream Jama had—it's an almost sacred place."

Now, as Jama and Allison talk in the barn, Evidence comes to. He stands groggily and steps over to his water bucket and—this is a good sign—takes a drink. Then he urinates and—this is not a good sign—the urine emerges not from his penis but rather spills from the new sutures across his rear, bringing Jama and Allison to their feet.

The situation is now beyond Doc T's expertise. She must get large-animal vets involved. She tries the veterinary school at Auburn University, 120 miles southwest, in Alabama. Back into the van.

With Pop and Jama up front, Charlie and Allison keep Evidence company in back. Evidence stands; Charlie and Allison sit along his left flank. They sit closely, the three of them, Evidence, Charlie, and Allison. And it's spring, remember. And after a while on the road, sitting close like that, Charlie leans in and kisses Allison for the first time and says, "I've been waiting a year to do that."

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The examination at Auburn shows what Doc T already determined: scrapes to the head, ears, muzzle, limbs, hocks. Also, a broken pelvic bone. And, most urgently, this: The laceration across Evidence's hind end cut through his penis, urethra, two hamstring muscles, and the muscle that stabilizes the anus.

The wounds will eventually kill Evidence if left untreated, yet repairing all of this will not be inexpensive. His care will require pelvic radiographs, anesthesia, sutures, monitoring, a urinary catheter, drape sheets, surgical blades and sponges, bandages, penicillin, Buckeye Mare's Milk Plus, and a hundred other things that add up.

The doctors tell Jama and Pop that they should figure on spending at least \$5,000, to start, if they plan to go for it. Noah's Ark doesn't have a hundred dollars to go for it. A nonprofit, the Ark operates mostly on the goodness of donors and the commitment of volunteers: Boy Scouts and corporations such as UPS and community concerns such as Hands on Henry. The nonprofit will take in \$1.1 million in donations and grants over the course of the year but spend nearly \$900,000 of that on the animals. Jama will pay herself \$23,995 this year and Charlie a little more. ("We don't get rich at Noah's Ark," says Diane Smith, Jama's assistant. "You don't work here unless you have a heart for this.")

Jama, who has always refused to allow Noah's Ark to accumulate debt, pulls out her MasterCard. The money to pay Evidence's hospital bill will come from somewhere.

Evidence rests overnight in the ICU. In the morning, the surgeons gown up and operate. They remove the penis and testicles; they restructure the urethra, to allow for urination. The surgery goes well.

Days pass, and Evidence grows stronger. Kindergarten classes send him get-well cards. Donors mail in checks for \$3 and \$3,000, which pay for a stable and a horse trailer. Everyone is pulling for Evidence. And when it is time for him to come home to Noah's Ark, the Alabama Highway Patrol gives him a lights-and-sirens escort all the way to the state line, and Henry County deputies pick up the honor when they near Locust Grove. At Noah's Ark, busloads of schoolchildren cheer as Charlie leads Evidence out of the zebra-striped Hummer that Lowe Engineers, whose company mascot is a zebra, has donated for the ride home. Evidence is as famous as a Georgia zebra can be.

He still needs antibiotics and a special cream for what Pop calls "his real bad boo-boos." Pop is the only human Evidence will allow anywhere near him. Pop administers all the medicine and tends to Evidence's wounds. They spend five or six hours a day together. "Come on and eat something, son," Pop will say in his soft Tennessee drawl. "Come here, son," he'll say. He brushes Evidence and talks to him. Evidence learns Pop's voice. Sometimes he stands on Pop's foot or steps between Pop and the gate, as if to keep him from leaving. He follows Pop around like a puppy. If something makes him nervous, like a pig—Evidence is terrified of pigs—he sticks his head under Pop's arm.

Pop is slight and dark, with almost black-brown eyes. The first time Jama saw him—she was a girl of fourteen; they were at church—she knew they would marry. Of the Hedgecoths who can be seen around the Ark's grounds daily—pruning the crape myrtles or delivering loads of feed on a four-wheeler—Pop is usually the one building or repairing something. His grandchildren call him "sir." The family has always noticed something special between Pop and horses, but never more so than between Pop

and Evidence, who seems to think of Pop as his mother.

One day in June, two months after the accident, Pop finds Evidence lying down. Evidence never lies down. Immediately, they head back to Auburn.

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There's a problem with the urethra. The doctors operate a second time, and Evidence returns to his hay-strewn stall in ICU. Auburn's veterinary hospital is one of the oldest and best in the country, and extremely nice, but Evidence's stall reminds Jama of a prison cell. So she brings toys.

The only humans allowed near Evidence, though, are his surgeon, Dr. Justin Harper, and Pop. A sign on the stall door says so: "No one allowed but Dr. Harper or Pop." Whenever Pop tries to leave, Evidence whinnies, so Pop stays, and Evidence sticks his head under Pop's arm. "It's okay, son, it's okay," Pop says.

Just when everyone thinks Evidence will be fine, colic sets in. Colic is a fast-moving problem of the digestive system, often caused by intestinal blockages, and the number one killer of horses. It is difficult and expensive to treat. Equines usually either get better or they don't, and in the meantime they suffer. Evidence rolls around in his stall and knocks his head against the wall in pain. Dr. Harper tells Pop and Jama their boy is in bad shape and isn't getting better. The point may come when they'll need to make a difficult decision.

"That's not an option," Jama tells Dr. Harper, knowing they are talking about euthanasia. "He's got a bad bellyache, right?"

"Major," Dr. Harper says.

"Well, he'll either die on his own or he'll get better," Jama says. She and Pop both are crying.

"Tonight will be the big night," the doctor says. "We can't do any more. Now it's up to him."

Pop says, "I'm not leaving."

Jama goes to the Best Western. She calls several churches and puts Evidence's name on the prayer lists. "Is Evidence a son or a daughter?" she is asked. Jama figures she shouldn't tell anyone the prayer recipient is a zebra—they might not pray. "He's part of my family," she tells them, "and he's critical right now."

All night, Pop walks Evidence round and round his stall and out to the grassy area between stables. "It's okay, son, it's okay." As the hours pass, the thrashing and head-banging stop. Around four in the morning, Evidence steps over to his feed bucket and begins to eat. At dawn, Pop calls Jama at the hotel.

"Dr. Harper says we can go home."

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Summer passes, and then come fall and winter. Evidence gets better, and bigger. It has been nearly one year since he tumbled out of someone else's life and into the hands and hearts of the Hedgecoths.

Because his birth date is uncertain, the Hedgecoths make one up. They give him February 14, Valentine's Day. Soon after, Publix bakes a giant cake, and more than 300 Evidence fans show up at Noah's Ark to celebrate a zebra's first birthday. On that day, Charlie and Allison get married.

Evidence's name makes sense now to Jama and Pop and Charlie and Allison and everyone else because of the God-given love that happens at Noah's Ark, which was founded as a wildlife rescue and rehabilitation center but is also a children's care home. That is the other part of the Hedgecoths' job. Their childcare home is licensed by the state to take in up to twenty-four children at a time. Relatively few children go there anymore because the state has moved away from the group-home model of foster care, but at one time children filled the camplike bedrooms of the Hedgecoth house, a beautiful cedar and glass residence that looks like a lodge. According to state and federal records dating back a decade, there has never been a major problem with Noah's Ark, either with the animals or the children.

A lot of the children who've passed through Noah's Ark were, like the animals, unwanted, neglected, abused. Jama and Pop brought them in and introduced them to other small creatures that needed care: baby deer, newborn possums. "[The children] come to us very wounded," says Barbara Toner, a psychologist and Noah's Ark volunteer. "But they can look at a little kitten or a baby deer or a puppy who's also been hurt, and the children can begin to give love to an animal that needs it. And once they begin to give love to something else, they can begin to give love to themselves, which is so vitally important to their health and growth."

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This is the family Evidence joined. In addition to Charlie, the Hedgecoths have three other biological children, but that is not all. Eleven years ago, they adopted a thirty-year-old woman and former volunteer named Paula because Paula wanted to be a part of the Hedgecoth family. Then they adopted a two-day-old African American baby who is now a gangly seven-year-old named Elijah. Then they went to the Hunan province of China and adopted a baby girl they named Sarah, who turns four in October. Jama says, "Everybody deserves a family."

Children will never care for Evidence or even get close. Only the Hedgecoths care for the exotic animals, which live in triple-fenced, padlocked habitats inspected by the Department of Natural Resources. While most are generations removed from the wild, they are still undomesticated and can never be tamed, and therefore are potentially dangerous. Every now and then a Hedgecoth has to run out and remind visitors of that. "Ma'am, that baby is food," Jama once told a woman holding her toddler over the fence at the alligator pond.

Everyone is beginning to see that a zebra is not like a horse at all—that a small, sweet zebra will grow up to be a mean, kicking, biting zebra, because that is a zebra's nature. You cannot pet a zebra on the neck like you pet a horse—in the wild, the neck is the kill zone. Corner a zebra and it will whip around and kick you with force and accuracy. "You look at a lion and think, 'I know you can eat me.' You look at Evidence and think you can treat him like a horse. You think, 'Ooh, he lost his mother,'" Charlie says, and his mother interrupts: "Oh baby, he'll put a whuppin' on you like you've never seen."

The two most dangerous creatures at Noah's Ark are the leopard and Evidence.

The one human Evidence tolerates is Pop.

One summer afternoon that feels almost cool enough to be fall, Pop jumps into one of the Noah's Ark golf carts and buzzes down to the grove that houses the exhibit area. Evidence is standing in one corner of his shady habitat, which he shares with Gracie, a doleful miniature horse. People still send Evidence toys and cards and drawings and apple licks. They come from as far away as Florida to see him, straight up I-75.

"Hey, son," Pop says.

When he hears Pop's voice, Evidence begins following the cart along the fence line. Pop speeds up, and Evidence begins to run. He is big now, and graceful and beautiful.

Pop says again, "Hey, son."