

[guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk)

# Hundreds of pelicans found dead along west coast of US

- Over 100 pelicans rescued in California
- Some symptoms resemble poisoning due to an ocean toxin
- Large number of adult pelican deaths perplexes experts

---

McClatchy newspapers

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 7 January 2009 17.20 GMT

---

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

---



Pelicans are seen at the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Centre in Huntington Beach, California. Hundreds of disoriented or dead birds have been observed across the west coast of the United States. Photograph: Rex Features

Pelicans suffering from a mysterious malady are crashing into cars and boats, wandering along roadways and turning up dead by the hundreds across the US west coast, from southern Oregon to California and Mexico, bird rescue workers say.

Weak, disoriented birds are huddling in people's yards or being struck by cars. More than 100 have been rescued along the California coast, according to the International Bird Rescue Research Centre in San Pedro, California.

"One pelican actually hit a car in Los Angeles," said Rebecca Dmytryk of Wildrescue, a bird rescue programme. "One pelican hit a boat in Monterey."

In Orange County, California, an estimated 25 to 30 birds have been treated at the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Centre in Huntington Beach in the last three weeks.

Many of the birds die of the illness; some recover and are released. "We did have someone observe a pelican try to land on the ledge of a building," said Debbie McGuire, wildlife director at the center. "And then it fell to its death."

While some of the symptoms resemble those associated with domoic acid poisoning,

an ocean toxin that sometimes affects sea birds and mammals, other symptoms do not. Domoic acid also apparently has not been found in significant amounts offshore, rescuers said, although more tests are needed.

"These birds are on the freeway, getting run over," said Jay Holcomb, executive director of the rescue centre in San Pedro. "A bunch we've seen have been hit. They've been landing on yards five miles inland. When some of the people have captured them in parking lots, they just sit in the corner. They just go pick them up."

Eight of the troubled birds were being cared for Tuesday at the care centre in Huntington Beach.

"They're coming in very weak, very dehydrated, emaciated," veterinarian Erin Hogan said. "One came in just laying down, still breathing." Many of the birds also have swollen feet.

Rescuers are wondering whether the illness is caused by a virus, or even by contaminants washed into the ocean after recent fires.

Heather Nevill, a veterinarian tracking the problem for the International Bird Rescue Research Centre, said the malady could be anything from disease to a suite of converging, harmful environmental conditions.

"Maybe the weather has been particularly difficult on them," Nevill said. "Maybe the fish stocks are particularly low. It might be more than one thing, all coming together at once."

The group is working with California Fish and Game wildlife veterinarian Pamela Swift, who said she is trying to obtain fresh carcasses so samples can be sent to laboratories for analysis. Results could come by next week. Occasional disoriented birds are not unusual, the rescuers said. Young pelicans also often turn up starving or debilitated.

But the pelicans appearing along California shores are adult birds, and the sheer number of them is highly unusual, rescuers and veterinarians said. "This year, quite a few adult birds are coming in starving", Nevill said. "That's not typical."

Dmytryk put the situation in starker terms. "I've been rescuing wildlife on the California coast since 1981," she said. "And I've never seen anything like this."