

Brown pelicans washing up dead and dying on California beaches

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In an ocean mystery that is baffling marine biologists, at least 1,000 brown pelicans have turned up dead or in distress along California beaches during the past month, with hundreds overwhelming wildlife rescue centers from the Bay Area to San Diego.

The popular birds, whose wingspans can reach 8 feet and who dramatically dive into ocean waters to scoop up fish, are widely reported to be hungry and disoriented.

They also appear to have some kind of substance — possibly a naturally occurring material from a red tide or other ocean conditions — that is causing their feathers to lose insulation properties, exposing the birds' skin to cold water and hypothermia.

"It's a mystery. It's tragic. It's very sad to see these poor birds suffer," said Dana Michaels, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Fish and Game. "I hope we can get to the bottom of it. There's something really endearing about pelicans."

Over the past week, the department announced it is pooling resources with wildlife rescue centers from around the state to try to determine the cause.

Starting in mid-January, many of the birds began showing up in Southern California with problems. Reports of distressed pelicans have become common all the way to the Oregon border, with dozens found in places such as Del Monte Beach in Monterey, Main Beach in Santa Cruz and several spots along the San Francisco coast.

Many of the Northern California pelicans are being taken to Solano County, to the International Bird Rescue Research Center in Cordelia.

"I've been doing wildlife rehabbing for 40 years," said Jay Holcomb, director of the center. "With pelicans, this is the worst I've ever seen."

Harmful residue

Last week the center treated about 100 pelicans, and its other hospital in San Pedro, near Los Angeles, is caring for 200. The birds are gobbling down 1,000 pounds of mackerel and other fish a day, at a cost of more than \$1,000, causing the nonprofit agency to run short of money.

The odd thing, Holcomb said, is that while the birds don't appear to be fouled — like with crude oil after an oil spill — they do have a harmful residue on their feathers.

"When we wash them you can tell something is coming off. The water is discolored, like when you wash really dirty clothes," he said. "That's not normal."

The good news, said Holcomb, is that if the birds are brought in soon enough, they can be cleaned, fed and restored to health in two weeks, then released. About 60 percent of the pelicans taken to the

two centers are surviving.

Scientists have several theories about possible causes of the problem.

This is an El Niño year, a condition that makes Pacific waters warmer than normal. In past El Niño years, pelicans have had problems, said Michaels of Fish and Game, possibly because the sardines and anchovies they eat have moved to different locations as parts of the ocean warmed. Also, she noted, there is less upwelling — cold water moving to the surface, bringing plankton, small marine creatures and other sea life that sardines and anchovies eat.

Red tides?

Heavy storms also are causing polluted runoff — oil, sewage, pesticides — to wash from the land to the sea, potentially impacting pelicans.

"I'm guessing it's a perfect storm, a trifecta, of the storms, polluted runoff from the rains and lack of food," said Carmel resident Karen Benzel, who has helped rescue a dozen ailing pelicans.

Necropsies on 12 pelicans at the Fish and Game lab in Santa Cruz have found the birds are eating species they don't normally eat, like squid. Feathers were sent to a Fish and Game lab in Rancho Cordova for chemical testing, but the results aren't back yet.

Last year, researchers from the University of California-Santa Cruz and other institutions published a study showing that a naturally occurring red tide was to blame in 2007 after 550 grebes, loons and other birds were stranded, hypothermic, on Monterey Bay beaches, and another 207 died.

A huge bloom of marine algae caused a soap-like foam to coat the birds' feathers, they found, stripping them of their waterproofing qualities.

"There are some similarities now," Holcomb said.

Ironically, brown pelicans were removed from the federal endangered species list last year. Driven to near extinction by the chemical DDT, their numbers nationally rebounded after it was banned in 1972. Holcomb and some other pelican advocates opposed delisting of the California population.

Fish and Game officials are asking people who see distressed pelicans not to feed or capture them, but instead to call wildlife rescue professionals at 866-WILD-911 (866-945-3911). Donations to the International Bird Rescue Research Center can be made at the www.ibrrc.org.

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