

PELICANS RESCUED AS FROSTBITE TAKES ITS TOLL

MIGRATORY BIRDS FAIL TO HEAD SOUTH

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For the fourth year in a row, dozens of pelicans have not flown south for the winter and instead stayed in the waters of Smith Creek in Ridge as frigid weather arrived. Rescuers saved most of the local layovers last week, although some have died of frostbite and malnutrition.

Through November and most of December, several dozen brown pelicans were feeding on alewives in the lower Potomac River and its tributaries, Maryland Department of Natural Resources staff said. Once the thermometer began dropping below freezing, the birds' feeding slowed and, for some, frostbite formed on their feet, bill pouches and wing tips.

That is when Maryland Department of Natural Resources employed what has become its pelican protocol, which basically involves catching the birds that are too weak to fly, sending them to a local bird rehabilitator and once enough are gathered, shipping them elsewhere for long-term rehabilitation.

This is what happened last week, when more than two dozen pelicans were rescued from St. Mary's waters after they developed frostbite and malnutrition.

The birds were taken to Lisa Fischer's Suburban Wildlife Rescue, based out of her home in Mechanicsville, for a brief stopover before they were then transported to a larger facility in Delaware.

"They're pretty weak," Fischer said last week.

Wildlife rescuers working with staff from Maryland Department of Natural Resources caught 29 of the large birds in Smith Creek early last week, but some remained.

Fischer initially kept the birds before they were transported last Wednesday to Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research in Newark, Del.

Rescuers and DNR staff are monitoring those remaining birds to keep any more from dying.

Nick Sagwitz, wildlife rescue technician for DNR, caught two more pelicans on Monday.

Several of the rescued birds were euthanized because of the extent of their injuries and at least six more were found dead in and around Smith Creek, said David Heilmeier, southern region manager for DNR.

He said that the agency now has a protocol to deal with the birds, which will probably be an issue every winter.

"This is part of what my wildlife response unit does," Heilmeier said. The rescue hasn't cost much money for DNR, he said, since the time spent was built into the normal work schedule for his staff.

Tom Courtney, owner of Courtney's Restaurant, said some of the birds began taking shelter in and around the outbuildings on his property a week or so ago.

He fed them a little bit of frozen fish, just enough to keep them alive, once they got to the point of not being able to feed themselves, he said.

The schools of bait fish in the area probably is what kept the pelicans from migrating south like they normally would, but the weather turned icy cold quickly and then the birds essentially were stranded here, Courtney said.

"They're warm weather birds and they can't stand the really cold weather," Heilmeier said.

Last year DNR used pyrotechnics to scare the birds into migrating south. Officers used "shell crackers" shot from shotguns over the birds, but most simply flew to other areas of the local creeks.

"It's a difficult circumstance," he said. "Unfortunately, it's not something we can just let nature take its course."

Heilmeier said that judging by bands on the birds, few are repeat offenders.

Heidi Stout, executive director of the Delaware-based rescue and research organization and a veterinarian, said one of the birds from the original rescue last week died the first night it was at the shelter and five others were determined to be too heavily frostbitten and were euthanized.

The remaining 23 rescued birds, Stout said, are doing well and will hopefully be returned to the bay in several weeks or longer once the weather warms.

She said pelicans do not tolerate cold weather as well as other birds.