



Rehabilitated brown pelicans are released into the water in Newport Harbor by Wetlands and Wildlife Center staff.

Pelicans test the water

Injured, starving pelicans nursed back to health at the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center are released at Corona del Mar beach.

By Alicia Robinson

(Published: July 20, 2006)

CORONA DEL MAR -- It's hard out there for a pelican.

After a June 22 collision with a car windshield in Laguna Beach, a now-recovered California brown pelican nicknamed "Crash" was released at the water's edge in Corona del Mar State Beach Thursday.

Workers from Huntington Beach's Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center, which nursed the young female bird back to health, also released 10 other pelicans that had been victims of fishing lines and hooks or starvation.

Crash may have hit the car because she'd been poisoned by domoic acid, a substance produced by red tide algae that is eaten by fish, which are then eaten by birds. Center officials are still waiting for the results of tests for domoic acid.

Even as the 11 birds were let go, animal care workers expect more to take their places at the center, mainly because they can't get enough to eat. Unusually warm water temperatures are driving small fish farther below the ocean's surface, making it harder for young pelicans to catch them, Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center director Debbie McGuire said.

"It's happening up and down the entire coast of California," she said. "Here they're finally starting to get to a point where they can make it off the endangered list and this happens."

Since June 22, the center has cared for more than 70 pelicans, and six were brought in Thursday as the 11 recovered birds were being released.

Meanwhile, Crash -- who got stitches in her pouch and had a pin removed from her toe -- and her healthy fellows, got a day in the media spotlight when they were returned to the wild on a boardwalk at the north end of the beach.

It took four SUVs to transport the birds in cages to the beach. Workers carried them to the water's edge and the care center's assistant director Lisa Birkle orchestrated their release.

"This is almost like a Broadway production," joked a TV newsman watching the proceedings. And as first one bird and then another stepped gingerly from the cages and onto the sidewalk, they indeed resembled a feathered chorus line.

After a moment of blinking at the cameras, the pelicans began making the short hop to the water several feet below the walkway.

Crash was the last bird to go, living up to her name when she stepped hesitantly off the edge and tumbled onto a rock. But she quickly righted herself and soon was afloat, bobbing away toward her companions as they rinsed themselves in salt water and stretched their wings.

"Look at them all bathing. They're so happy," Birkle said.

The release was a success, but plenty of work awaits the care center staff.

In June, the center received a number of calls about pelicans behaving

strangely, possibly from domoic acid poisoning, which makes birds disoriented, acting as if they're drunk.

The water has been at least 4 degrees warmer because of atmospheric conditions, so food for the birds has been scarce. At the same time, bird researchers have noticed a pelican baby boom.

All told, the center has taken in nearly 4,000 animals since January, a huge jump from the 3,200 intakes in all of 2005.

The bright spot in Thursday's bird release is the media attention, which can help raise donations for the center. McGuire said the center has had to spend \$800 to \$1,000 a week buying a half-ton of fish to feed all the birds in its care.

One pelican eats about 10 pounds of fish per day.

<http://www.dailypilot.com/front/story/51052p-78305c.html>