



Pelicans in peril: Starving birds looking for food, getting snagged by fishhooks

THOMAS SCHULTZ, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

June 27, 2006 7:45 AM

Wildlife rescue workers are scrambling to save baby pelicans starving off the coast of Santa Barbara -- and many of the birds are seeking sustenance off Stearns Wharf, where they are being snagged with fishhooks.

"One bird had four fishhooks in it," said Sally Bromfield, a director of the nonprofit and volunteer Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network. "It's really a

problem.

"We should not feed them at the pier, because they are hanging around like pets," she said. "The more (residents and tourists) feed them, the more they hang around and the more they get caught up in fishing lines."

Researchers are scratching their heads over the starvation situation, which has emerged following a bumper crop of baby California brown pelicans born this spring on Anacapa Island and elsewhere along the West Coast. An endangered species, the pelican has rebounded in recent years, prompting calls to remove it from the federal list of threatened animals.

Some experts wonder if the population boom has created new competition for food.

Another theory is that a warming sea lures fish into deeper and colder waters, and farther from their airborne predators, Ms. Bromfield said.

A third possibility is that parent pelicans have died from domoic acid poisoning, leaving their offspring orphaned and ill-equipped to survive, she said.

Domoic acid comes from a toxic algae, attacking the brains and nervous systems of dolphins, sea lions and seabirds that feed on sardines and anchovies that consume the algae. Humans rarely are affected.

Veterinary pathologists from the Marine Wildlife Care and Research Center in Santa Cruz have investigated the mystery since early May, when pelicans started stranding along the coast of Ventura County.

"They will continue to examine affected pelicans and issue a report once significant findings and summary information have been collected," according to a June 20 state Department of Fish and Game announcement. In the last few days, investigators sent 31 dead pelicans to the department's Santa Cruz center. "Starvation and malnutrition are the most common findings."

That's not the birds' only hazard.

Janet Flora, a visitor from Southern California, on Monday described a

"horrific" scene she witnessed at Stearns Wharf during a recent weekday visit for lunch.

"It was shocking," she told the News-Press. "I've never seen a brown pelican standing at the end of Stearns Wharf. There were like 15 of them."

During her visit, a fisherman cast his line, which had a few hooks connected four inches or so apart, and "the next thing you know this guy is dragging this pelican by its beak down the wharf. There were 30 or 40 tourists. People were gasping," Ms. Flora said.

"If they (pelicans) are protected, it's being blatantly violated at the end of that pier," she said. "I want to see this stopped. How do you cast when you have four big birds standing right behind you? It's like a petting zoo."

"This is not new," said Waterfront Department manager John Bridley. "It has happened in the past. It's usually a summertime phenomenon."

He said there are a lot of mackerel being caught from the wharf at the moment, and birds "are after the same thing."

Mr. Bridley said the city has asked state Fish and Game to step up its patrols of the wharf so they can educate the public and enforce laws that protect pelicans.

There are signs posted there, he added, and staff check the wharf three times a day, removing discarded hooks and fishing line.

Also, "We've asked that Harbor Patrol and city staff do increased patrols."

Pelicans shouldn't be offered tidbits, Mr. Bridley said.

"When we feed them," he said, "the birds are more used to coming near to us, or fishermen."

Since April, 55 pelicans have been brought in to the Wildlife Care Network facility in the Goleta foothills; 23 are still there. Eleven have been released, 13 died and eight have been transferred to a San Pedro care center due to their complex injuries.

The Goleta facility is located at the home of seabird rescue supervisor June Taylor, and features a large artificial pond. Fishhooks are pulled from beaks and gullets there, and injured wings are wrapped to prevent further damage.

If needed, antibiotics are administered. Rehydration begins almost immediately and parasites are treated.

And rescuers offer the birds fish.

Most of the birds arrive weighing 5 to 6 pounds, and leave 10 days to two weeks later at 8 to 9 pounds, which is considered full weight, Ms. Taylor said.

"If they are starved, they don't even want to eat. They can't digest," she said.

"If they don't take the fish, we give them some Ensure with a tube," she said, adding that Pedialyte is another remedy. "Once they start eating, they eat hordes and hordes."



News-Press staff writer Anna Davison contributed to this report. E-mail:

tschultz@newspress.com

<http://www.newspress.com/Top/Article/article.jsp?Section=LOCAL&ID=564759454013325415>

