



Tribune photo by David Middlecamp  
*Liz Klinzman puts water into a pan of smelt for pelicans being rehabilitated Monday by the animal rescue group Pacific Wildlife Care. Rash of starving pelicans perplexes local rescuers. An unusual number of hungry young birds has been rescued lately; experts suspect a baby boom of inexperienced divers may be the cause*

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Animal rescue volunteers fill a bucket with small fish, and eight ravenous brown pelicans crowd around, filling their pouches and swallowing the fish down in bunches.

The birds are part of an unusual influx of starving young brown pelicans that have been rescued this month around San Luis Obispo County.

Animal rescue group Pacific Wildlife Care has rescued 23 pelicans and has received tips about dozens of others in distress.

"This is not normal for us," said Dani Nicholson, gesturing at the pelicans lounging on the lawn of her Cayucos home, which is where the birds will spend from two weeks to a month regaining their strength until they are ready for release back into the wild.

The state Department of Fish and Game has been looking into the phenomenon, which extends from here into Southern California, in an attempt to find out what is causing it, said Barbie Dugan, Pacific Wildlife Care president.

The ocean has plenty of mackerel, sardines and anchovies, the pelican's main prey species, so a lack of food is not the cause.

They suspect that a successful pelican breeding season on the Channel Islands has produced an unusually large number of pelicans under a year old that have not mastered the species' method of feeding — dramatic plunging dives into the ocean.

"It takes them a couple, three years to perfect their diving skills," Dugan said. "There's often 50 to 75 percent mortality in the first year."

State wildlife biologists are also examining dead pelicans to determine if toxic algal blooms are making the young pelicans sick. Last year, toxic blooms killed hundreds of sea lions, which also feed on the small fish.

Nicholson and other rescuers knew that something was wrong in April when people began reporting listless pelicans that allowed people and dogs to approach them. Pelicans also began showing up in inland locations away from their normal ocean habitat.

"We rescued one pelican from a deck in San Luis Obispo," she said.

What was a small number of starving pelicans in April and May needing help has grown in a regular rescue effort in June, with volunteers picking up one pelican a day.

They have also responded to numerous calls where a bird was obviously in distress but still had enough strength to fly away and avoid capture.

Rehabilitation of the pelicans begins with giving them fluids and keeping them warm. A fish mush is then administered. Eventually, the birds are ready for solid food again — buckets full of smelt, a form of baitfish.

A pelican can eat its weight in fish in a single day, causing a considerable expense for the volunteer group, which purchases the fish from Central Coast Seafood.

"So far, we don't see an end in sight," Nicholson said. "We're getting six to 10 calls a day for pelicans."

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