

Cold pelicans find cozy home in Montross nursery

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Pelicans, rescued from area waters, are being housed in a temperature-controlled greenhouse at Red Oak Nursery in Montross. The birds were starving and freezing in the cold weather after not migrating to warmer climates.

By FRANK DELANO

This is the story of how a Westmoreland County greenhouse became a cozy hospital for pelicans.

Yesterday, 26 of the big, brown birds seemed to be resting comfortably on straw in a heated, humid greenhouse at Red Oak Nursery near Montross.

The patients were hungry. Their long, slender beaks clacked as they gulped down fish laced with medicine.

The nurse-dietitian was Diana O'Connor of the Wild Bunch Wildlife Rehabilitation Refuge near Warsaw. She rescued the first two pelicans last week by the icy Rappahannock River at Tappahannock.

"They were starving and suffering from hypothermia and frostbite. They were so depleted and weak that we just picked them up," said O'Connor. She also found two dead birds on the shore.

She called R.G. "Doc" Wexler, director of Wildlife Research and Rescue on the Chesapeake in southern Maryland.

"Have you seen any pelicans over there?" she asked Wexler.

"No," said Wexler.

"Well, start looking," said O'Connor, a veteran wildlife rehabilitator.

It didn't take long for Wexler and his volunteers in Maryland to find lots of pelicans in trouble in the frigid waters of the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River.

"Pelicans don't have feathering or down to protect them from the cold," O'Connor said.

On Wednesday, Wexler and his crew delivered a dozen pelicans in cages to a makeshift shelter. Around midnight, O'Connor arrived from Maryland with another eight. Four more came Thursday.

"They're going to need a lot of fish," thought Gary Hutt, who owns the nursery.

Hutt got involved in the pelican placement through his wife, Janice, who sells ads for The Westmoreland News in Montross. O'Connor came by the paper to buy an ad appealing for plastic sheeting. O'Connor wanted to wind-proof shelters for the pelicans at her refuge.

But Janice Hutt thought she could get plastic from some of the many greenhouse growers she knew.

She knew one especially well.

"I asked my husband to offer Diana some plastic and he offered the pelicans a home," she said.

Stanley O'Bier of Pride of Virginia Seafood Products in Northumberland County volunteered the food: frozen buckets of oily menhaden that the pelicans appear to relish. They're eating about 75 pounds a day.

Wildlife experts say pelicans used to live only in warmer waters of the Southeast coast. Now thousands try to survive winter in the Chesapeake Bay.

Bryan Watts of the Center for Conservation Biology of the College of William & Mary said wildlife biologists found the first pair of breeding pelicans in the Chesapeake Bay in 1987. Now, about 1,300 pairs nest on Bay islands.

"The Chesapeake Bay population of pelicans has been doubling every three years," Watts said.

"Why they're pushing their range north and suffering in these cold winters is not clear," Watts said. "It's become almost an annual, winter thing in the Chesapeake region to find pelicans incapable of flying."

The pelicans in the greenhouse hospital face triage today.

O'Connor said Wexler is coming from Maryland to examine each bird and perhaps perform minor surgery on frostbitten spots of some of the birds' big, webbed feet.

O'Connor expects to keep the birds safe, warm and fed until the weather warms up. Then, they'll be released in the Potomac.

Wexler may bring more pelicans today.

"They've got three crews in Maryland chasing 11 birds," she said

yesterday. "That's OK. We've got plenty of room and plenty of fish."
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