

* Video: Orphans of storm rescued 2/28/07
<<http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070228/VIDEO01/302280016/1006/NEWS>>

On the Web

* Tri-State Bird Rescue

Orphans of the storm rescued

Young pelicans should have flown south, but lingered in mild early winter weather

By MOLLY MURRAY, The News Journal
Posted Wednesday, February 28, 2007



Brown pelicans recover at Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research in Milford Crossroads. The big birds are usually in warmer climates this time of year, but the mild early winter fooled some. (Buy photo) The News Journal/SUCHAT PEDERSON



Dr. Erica Miller, staff veterinarian at Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, checks out some of the 14 pelicans recovering at the center near Newark.(Buy photo) The News Journal/SUCHAT PEDERSON

Throughout the sunny days of summer, brown pelicans make a showy display, drifting just above the water and then falling fast like a dive bomber, coming up with a bill full of fish.

When cold weather rolls around, pelicans typically head south. But this year, when November, December and early January stayed warm, some of the younger birds hung around the Delmarva Peninsula's coastal beaches.

When winter finally hit, and the birds hadn't left, they ran into trouble. Some lost legs. Others suffered severe frostbite.

Two weeks ago, more than a dozen of the birds were discovered along beaches from Virginia to Maryland.

Some were so badly injured they had to be euthanized, said Arlene Boles, development director for Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, near Newark. Others were already dead.

But 14 of the birds, all juveniles, are beginning a slow recovery at the Milford Crossroads center.

"They seem to be holding their own," Boles said. "These were just birds that were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Rehabilitation experts at the center are optimistic that the birds will recover and eventually be re-released into the wild.

Meanwhile, the pelicans -- birds that can have a wing span of nearly 7

feet and weigh up to 11 pounds -- are eating 60 to 100 pounds of herring a day, receiving specialized care and splashing around in pools.

While no one can say for certain why the pelicans stayed north this year, Boles said, scientists believe the young birds may not have been aware that they needed to head south until the weather turned cold.

One ornithologist suggested that the pelicans probably lingered because a shift in the Gulf Stream kept the water warmer. Meanwhile, the birds seem to be doing okay, Boles said. "They seem to be holding their own."

No one is sure whether February's dramatic turn in temperatures caught other animals unaware, as well.

"I doubt if there is any actual data, but probably lots of birds that were attempting to ... winter further north than usual got caught by the cold," said Ken Rosenberg, director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "This probably happens to some extent every year, but the very warm weather through New Year's, I'm sure, made it much worse this year."

In Ithaca, N.Y., for instance, where the ornithology lab is located, a yellow warbler was seen on Jan. 7 -- "the day before the big freeze," he said. Warblers would normally have migrated to much warmer climates by December.

Biologists at the American Bird Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation have noticed other cases where changing weather patterns seems to influence bird behavior.

"We are hearing more and more about the seasons getting shifted," said Steve Holmer, of the American Bird Conservancy. "This was a strange year."

A recent report by the bird conservancy and wildlife federation found many birds are changing their migration patterns because of changes in climate, temperature and rainfall.

Birds often use temperature as a signal to migrate south or return north after winter. Because weather influences the availability of food supplies like flowers, seeds and insects, the changes have a big impact, the

researchers found.

Contact Molly Murray at 856-7372 or mmurray@delawareonline.com.

THE BROWN PELICAN

THE BIRD: Brown pelicans are big birds -- about 4 feet in length. As youngsters they are brown, but they develop brown-and-gray feathers as they reach maturity at four or five years of age. They have a large bill with a pouch of skin that can hold two to three times as much as the stomach can.

RANGE: Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf coasts. Along the Atlantic they are typically found from North Carolina south to Florida, but they are sometimes summer visitors to the Delaware, Maryland and Virginia coasts.

DIET: Fish, some crustaceans. Brown pelicans are plunge divers, meaning they drop from the air to scoop up fish in their bill and pouch like a net.

THREATS: Brown pelican populations declined when pesticides such as DDT were in use in the United States. They are still listed as an endangered species except along the Atlantic Coast and the Florida and Alabama Gulf coasts. They were originally listed in June 1970.

HOW TO HELP

The Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research near Newark is looking for help. Cash donations are being sought to help offset the hefty fish bill. The center also needs donations of sheets, large bath towels, hydrogen peroxide and duct tape to use in the care of the birds.