



Sick brown pelicans recover inside an enclosure at the Pacific Wildlife Care animal hospital in Morro Bay.

Sick pelicans overwhelm local rescue centers

Organizations apply for state, federal help while they search for the cause of illness

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Officials from wildlife rescue organizations in the state say they are struggling with an influx of starving brown pelicans.

Rescue centers in Southern California have been hit hardest. Almost 500 sick pelicans have been brought in statewide since the first of the year.

The large seabirds — all adults — are coming in weak, starving and occasionally injured, said Dani Nicholson, president of Pacific Wildlife Care. The group's Morro Bay rehabilitation center has gotten 20 pelicans since the first of the year.

"It's unprecedented," she said. "We're overwhelmed."

Wildlife veterinarians are trying to determine the cause of the influx, Nicholson said. Toxic algal blooms, battering by recent storms and disruptions in the marine food chain caused by the El Niño weather event are all possibilities.

The birds are typically found standing disoriented in the middle of a road or some other unusual place.

In addition to the pelicans rescued locally, the Morro Bay hospital is taking them from overwhelmed hospitals in Southern California.

The influx has caused four rescue organizations, including Pacific Wildlife Care, to appeal to state and federal authorities for help. They are afraid they may have to close their doors temporarily in order to cope, said Jay Holcomb of the International Bird Rescue Research Center, which operates facilities in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas.

"Members of the public are reporting sightings of sick and dying birds with increasing frequency, and there may be a negative reaction if there is an expectation of care for these birds but no resources to respond," he said.

In spite of the crisis, Pacific Wildlife Care rescuers say people should continue to report sick or stranded pelicans by calling 543-9453 or 772-9453.

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