

## HOOK, LINE AND STARVATION

**Fishing in Morro Bay proves perilous for pelicans; 140 of the starving birds crowd local rescue agency.**

Starving brown pelicans crowd Pacific Wildlife Care, many of them entangled in fishing line and hooks

By David Sneed



TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JAYSON MELLOM

Animal rescuers at Pacific Wildlife Care have treated nearly 140 starving brown pelicans over the past two months — many of them coming in tangled in fishing line and impaled by hooks.

Starving juvenile pelicans are a problem every summer. Newly fledged birds are inexperienced hunters and some are always casualties, said Dani Nicholson, Pacific Wildlife Care president. But this year is unusual.

“This is the worst year I’ve ever seen,” she said. “The numbers are just incredible.”

Two pelicans a day on average have arrived at the group’s triage center in Morro Bay since June. A little more than half can be saved.

Nicholson speculates that the starving birds are attracted to fishing piers, where they can get free handouts or steal a fish off an angler’s hook. Some invariably get tangled.

The line restricts their movement and cuts off blood circulation to extremities. It’s a death sentence unless the bird is rescued.

“Sometimes we’ll take six hooks out of one bird,” she said.

Nicholson thinks the large number of starving pelicans is attributable to an unusually large number of chicks that were born this year. The species recently expanded its nesting range in the Channel Islands. Subtle changes in the marine food chain may also be playing a role, she said.

Nicholson also thinks more people are reporting sick birds because they know Pacific Wildlife Care has a triage center dedicated to seabirds in Morro Bay. The facility opened in 2007.

Rescued birds are fed until they can fly and preen normally and are then released. Hook wounds are treated with antibiotics.

The group spends about \$500 a week feeding the pelicans.

Nicholson recommends that anglers who entangle a pelican notify a lifeguard, park ranger or harbor patrol officer. Don’t cut it loose without disentangling it, she said, and don’t haul it up out of the water onto the pier.

Earlier this year, Pacific Wildlife Care volunteers dealt with an influx of starving grebes.

Starving pelicans were also a problem last year. The species is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.