

PELICAN DIE-OFF TIED TO DECEMBER STORM IN NORTHWEST



A sick juvenile pelican at Pacific Wildlife Care hospital in Morro Bay

PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

Recent surge in numbers of dead and dying birds on California coast had mystified wildlife rescuers

By David Sneed

A mysterious influx of dead pelicans along California's coastline is due mostly to a severe winter storm that battered the Pacific Northwest in mid-December.

State wildlife biologists reported Friday that large numbers of the big, pouched birds were seen in the Columbia River area when a powerful storm and cold snap hit. Soon after, sick and dying pelicans began showing up at wildlife rescue hospitals in California, many of them with frostbite. "They come in cold and emaciated and they die very quickly," said Debbie Buckheim, a volunteer at the Pacific Wildlife Care hospital in Morro Bay. "It's just a phenomenon that we've never seen before."

Pelican die-offs can have a variety of causes--toxic algae blooms or juveniles unable to survive the winter -- but this

mortality event didn't fit any of those scenarios. Many of the dead birds were adults and none were suffering from seizures and other neurological problems associated with algal poisoning.

After looking at the data, harsh winter storms in Oregon and Washington appear to be the best explanation, said Dave Jessup, a senior wildlife veterinarian with the Department of Fish and Game. He has written a preliminary report summarizing his findings that will be released next week.

"We haven't gotten everything figured out, but I think we can explain most of it," he said. "The majority of this big bump is due to a late migration from the Columbia River when the area froze up."

Most of the sick pelicans were taken to wildlife hospitals in Fairfield and San Pedro operated by the International Bird Rescue Research Center. As of Thursday, those hospitals had received more than 160 pelicans. The Morro Bay hospital received four pelicans over the past week. Three of them died and one had blisters on its feet, which could have been caused by frostbite, Buckheim said.

Many of them are found disoriented in parking lots and other places away from the ocean that pelicans don't normally frequent. "They're showing up in strange places and are acting strangely," Jessup said.

This year's die-off is part of a larger trend with pelicans that biologists have noticed over the past decade. They are expanding their range northward.

Historically, Northern California was the extent of their range, but more and more they are showing up in Oregon and Washington. Winters have been mild in the Pacific Northwest over the past couple of years, Jessup said.

That changed dramatically this year when unusually cold and harsh storms lashed the area. Pelicans that had not yet migrated south to breeding rookeries in the Channel Islands were caught in conditions they were not able to handle.

"This year Oregon turned into Minnesota in the middle of December," Jessup said.

The investigation into the pelican crisis continues. Biologists are testing and examining dead birds and surveying the overall population.

Brown pelicans are protected as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.