

## County Roundup

### SLO County

The effects of the Nov. 7 San Francisco Bay oil spill are being felt by local wildlife rescuers.

Wildlife rehabilitation centers in Northern California have been overwhelmed by more than 1,000 seabirds oiled by 58,000 gallons of bunker fuel released when a tanker collided with the San Francisco Bay Bridge.

Nonoiled birds from other clinics are being sent to the Pacific Wildlife Care facility in Morro Bay for rehabilitation. Fifteen seabirds had arrived at the center as of Wednesday afternoon, said Kelly Vandeneuvel, a volunteer with the group.

“They are asking Pacific Wildlife Care to take the maximum number of birds we can handle at our facility and are transporting the birds as far as Monterey for PWC volunteers to pick up,” she said. “Seven birds arrived (Wednesday), and they plan on weekly deliveries for the foreseeable future.”

—David Sneed



### Wild about wildlife

Raccoons, possums find refuge in Nipomo

By Jennifer Best/Contributor



Pacific Wildlife Care volunteer Mary Mullan of Nipomo is taking care of a baby opossum, until she is big enough to survive in the wild. /Adobe/Bryan Walton

Mary Mullan has always been a fanatic about animals. She has a special affinity for dogs and cats, and has rescued more than her fair share.

But these days, she's as likely to house possums and raccoons as tabbies and terriers in her Nipomo home

“I just get tremendous satisfaction and joy out of helping our wildlife,” Mullan said.

By day, Mullan cleans houses, but in her spare time she is among dozens of San Luis Obispo County residents who volunteer with Pacific Wildlife Care, a nonprofit wildlife rescue and rehabilitation organization that serves the entire Central Coast.

For decades, volunteers answered distress calls to aid wild animals ranging from field mice to bobcats. Many provided transportation to local vets. Fewer took them home for rehabilitation before returning the creatures to their wild homes, the ultimate goal of the program.

In May, the organization celebrated the opening of a care center at 1387 Main St. in Morro Bay.

The new center is located on land donated by Duke Energy to the Marine Mammal Center, which has subleased a portion of the property to PWC.

The project is funded through donations and grants, most notably through support of the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, which is sponsored by California Department of Fish and Game Office of Spill Prevention and Response.

As a member of the network, PWC rescues and rehabilitates birds affected by oil spills. The program allows the center to be used for other wildlife during non-spill times.

“It’s amazing how many injured wildlife there are, particularly birds,” said Dr. Steven Paulick of Arroyo Grande’s VCA South County Animal Hospital. “We see everything from raptors to songbirds to seabirds almost every day.”

Paulick is among half a dozen veterinarians countywide who volunteer their services to PWC. Over the years, he’s treated a variety of birds, bobcats, weasels, raccoons, possums, deer, turkeys and a bear.

Sometimes it’s just a matter of providing antibiotics or minor treatment, but surgery is not out of the question. Not long ago, he pinned the broken wings of two crows, which he named Sheryl and Russell, before handing them over to Piper Hunter of Arroyo Grande for rehabilitation.

“Mostly I do it because it needs to be done, and we all like to have wildlife out there,” said Paulick, a Huasna resident. “It certainly adds another dimension to my work.”

In fact, said PWC Treasurer Andrea Muentner, most of the volunteers either live in rural areas or otherwise enjoy exploring the wilds. They have an understanding of wildlife, and an affinity for preserving the wilderness experience.

“A lot of animals we get are the result of human interaction — they’ve been hit by a car, crashed into the window of your house, pets get them,” she said. “Almost every person in this county has had an encounter with wildlife in some way where they’ve probably, though not on purpose, hurt an animal. This is a good way to give back for some of the damage we’ve done.”

The center focuses its efforts on native wildlife of any size.

“It’s ironic because while we feed the birds of prey live mice, but if a person calls with a mouse that their cat brought in, we’ll try to rehabilitate it,” Muentner said. “We know when we release it that it will probably become hawk food, but that’s the nature of what we do.”

They even rehabilitate animals that people generally think of as pests, including gophers and ground squirrels.

“It’s hard, because it goes against our grain because we think these are such pest animals, but they belong here,” she added.

Volunteers also provide educational experiences throughout the county with the use of any of seven animals that were unable to return to the wild. They are maintained by volunteers and include Polly the opossum, Tyto the barn owl, Ferbie the screech owl, Xena the American kestrel, Jack the merlin and Hoot the great horned owl.

Hunter has long housed larger birds of prey throughout their rehabilitation, and has served as hostess to Hoot for most of his 21 years with the organization. He found his way to her aviary as an owlet 21 years ago after falling from a nest.

“I’ve rescued all sorts of birds, but I love the birds of prey the most,” Hunter said. “They’re pretty majestic and not as time consuming as the little birds that you have to feed every 20 minutes.”

The venture is not a cuddly one.

“This is not advisable for people who think they want a wild animal for a pet,” Muentner said. “We take these orphaned babies and make them wild. It’s the only way they’ll survive. We take injured animals and rehabilitate them. All of these we release into the wild.”

And not every story has a happy ending. Of approximately 1,000 animals rescued every year by PWC volunteers, about half survive, according to Hunter.

“What we do is very, very hard because we deal with death a lot,” Muentner said.

Still, volunteers like Hunter and Mullan carry on with gusto.

“I wish I would have started years ago,” Mullan said.

#### HELP THE ANIMALS:

Pacific Wildlife Care is a volunteer-driven, nonprofit organization that rescues any injured wildlife.

If you find any wild animal that has been injured, call 543-WILD.

The organization is also seeking volunteers to help answer the hotline, tend to animals at the center, transport animals, rehabilitate animals and myriad other tasks that keep PWC going.

The center’s greatest single expense is food for the animals.

To donate, volunteer or for more information, log on to [www.pacificwildlifecare.org/mem.html](http://www.pacificwildlifecare.org/mem.html).