

OC ACCESS: WILDLIFE RESCUE

Something is happening to Orange County pelicans-and for a change, it's positive. A dedicated group known as the Pacific Wildlife Project is rescuing injured pelicans from along the coast-birds that might otherwise die of injuries from fishhooks and other man-made hazards. The Pacific Wildlife Project is a nonprofit public charity, licensed by state and federal wildlife authorities and headed by Dr. Rochard Evans, a veterinarian and wildlife biologist, and his wife Linda. Under the careful direction of Evans, injured pelicans are rescued from the wild, provided with medical care and nursed until they are healthy enough for release.

The California brown pelican has been staging a comeback locally for several years. Once considered endangered because of extensive pesticide use, the pelican has regained a foothold in the environment and shows signs of prospering. Often seen in or near local waterways, young birds have brown heads and white or streaked bellies. Mature birds sport white feathers and silver-gray wings and bodies.

"Unfortunately, the increasing numbers of these birds could be misleading," Evans says. "we don't know why so many birds are showing up close to shore. Are their numbers so great that offshore feeding grounds are becoming overcrowded? Or is forage becoming more scarce offshore? We just don't know."

Evans is concerned that many young birds are fishing in bays and estuaries near a slew of potential hazards created by man.

"If large numbers of these immature pelicans suffer injuries and die, the future breeding stock for the brown pelican is in jeopardy just as surely as if we began using DDT again."

The people at Pacific Wildlife Project arrange periodic rescue missions to bring birds in from the wild for treatment. The cost of nursing a pelican back to health is roughly \$100 per bird. To offset this expense, Pacific Wildlife Project has launched a unique Adopt-A-Pelican campaign aimed at local residents and civic organizations. Several birds can be "adopted" at a time (although they will remain at the project's Seabird Trauma and Recovery facility in Laguna Niguel until release), and the "parents" receive certificates as official Pelican Parents.

Actress and Orange County resident Mamie Van Doren has led the way by adopting Mr. P, the Pacific Wildlife Project's official mascot. "These creatures are victims of our human chauvinism," Van Doren said. "If an animal is not edible or of some other practical use, people don't seem to care. The pelican is important because it's here. And if we don't help them, who will?"

RESCUE

One cool, foggy Saturday morning in October, an expedition heads to Dana Point Harbor in search of injured pelicans. The volunteer crew consists of Anaheim police sergeant Jim Moore and his wife, Jill, the owners and operators of the Achilles inflatable boat; Jeanine Clack, an assistant certified by Evans to handle wild birds; Sharon Henderson and John Aiels, who make the large cardboard boxes with ventilating screens to transport the birds to the project's hospital; and Chuck Glasgow and Carrie Chambers, who record the event on film and videotape. I'm on board to record the event in writing.

We load the boat with a bucket of fish to entice the pelicans. Near the bait barge floating in one corner of Dana Point Harbor, there are dozens of pelicans looking for all the handouts they can get. Moore kills the engine 50 yards from the barge. A man on the barge looks at us curiously as we begin to lure the pelicans with the fish.

"We're from Pacific Wildlife Project," Clack calls over to him. "We're trying to pick up on any injured birds."

The man takes off his cap and scratches his head. "Take every damn one of 'em if you want."

Soon two dozen pelicans are quarreling over tidbits we toss into the water. The group paddles furiously, jockeying for position.

Clack's eyes sweep the birds, identifying the injured. "I don't like the way that one looks—he's a little skinny. And there's one with a hole in his neck, see?"

She flips a fish toward him, and, sure enough, an infected, quarter-sized hole is visible just below his pouch.

"C'mon," Clack croons, "just a little closer, just a little...now."

Getting a hold on the bird's beak with one hand, she grasps his wings near his body and lifts him into the boat. The method Clack uses, known as the "zoo carry," is widely accepted for handling these large birds, preventing them from struggling and injuring themselves.

"Do you think you can hold him still?" Clack asks me.

Holding his wings against his sides with my legs and his beak with my hand, I get my first close up look at a brown pelican. He is strange and prehistoric-looking, with smooth brownish-gray feathers and a faintly fishy smell. His eyes are dark and oddly trusting. It is easy to see how this bird could have trouble with a dangerous species like man.

It is a relatively short morning. We take eight birds out of the harbor. Other pelicans, some with injuries, elude us. Clack and I go into the water after a couple, because the pelicans are soon wise enough to shy away from the little red boat full of people busy kidnapping their neighbors.

Back on shore, we load the large cardboard boxes, each containing an unhappy pelican, into a pickup truck and drive to Pacific Wildlife Project's hospital.

Project director Linda Evans is waiting for us to check the birds into the hospital. each gets a leg band and a chart detailing its injuries and condition.

The most seriously injured has six fishhooks in his wings and legs. He has been tangled in monofilament for so long that one wing has become nearly useless. It is clear that this bird has not been accidentally hooked; someone has made repeated efforts to torment him. There is a piece of line hanging out of his mouth. The hook is too far down to reach. He will require X-rays. Two of us hold him while the exterior hooks are removed. It is a long morning for this pelican, but he is stoic. Someone dubs him Captain Hook.

When the ordeal is over and the bird is put into a hospital cage, Linda shakes her head sadly. "Don't know if we can save you or not, little guy."

When all eight birds are examined, we stand around feeling spent. The day is just beginning for the Evanses, however. They will make

rounds, do surgery, make more rounds, watch, clean and feed the pelicans late into the night.

RELEASE

Another morning, another week. The fog is burning off, and it's getting hot as we follow a pickup truck with a camper shell. Looking out the back window of the shell are seven curious and frightened, but otherwise healthy pelicans. Since pelicans can easily overheat under stress, they have been hosed down before leaving the hospital. They do not know it yet, but this promises to be a big day. The pelicans are about to be released.

Though none of these are the captured birds from the week before, all eight of those are making good progress. The best news is that Captain Hook might make it.

Our group collects Joy Lingenfelder, a Laguna Beach animal control officer, and we convoy down to South Laguna and the beach at Treasure Island. The surf crashes over the reef, and the sea gulls look down from the rocks. van Doren is there, along with Dr. Evans, Linda Evans and their regular volunteer staff: Jeanine clack, Chris Vibrans, David Evans and Valerie McPherson. The air of excitement is as palpable as the spanking breeze off the Pacific.

Clack and Lingenfelder handle the pelicans. Clack brings the first bird, a smallish youngster, to the edge of the rocks. Instead of flying, he stands looking puzzled at the water.

His companions are brought one at a time to the edge, where they flap great, graceful wings and soar low over the waves out into the bay. We clap and cheer for them and offer encouragement to the shy first one. The last bird stands undecidedly on the brink of flying, and for a moment it appears as if he, too, will elect to stay a little longer.

Then, with a final look, the last bird tentatively takes wing, flies a short distance and lands in the bay. he paddles out to sea, stretching and flapping his wings.

Linda Evans points to the lone first bird standing on the rock, looking after his brothers. "Let's take him back," she tells Clack. "I don't feel comfortable leaving him here." We'll release him next time."

Our group stands looking into the sun. Half a mile out are five of the six we released. Occasionally, one flies around the point, circles back and lands next to the others. We talk and watch the last bird we released as it works its way out to the group. It's a long paddle, but finally, all six are together, riding the swells. An adult bird, white-feathered, lands in the group. We pass around binoculars and watch as the newly freed pelicans gather around the older bird.

We have made a small difference

--*Thomas Dixon*