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Pelican rescue on at Salton Sea

by: Ann Pepper

It's a recurring nightmare and, this time, it's started early: the botulism outbreak that kills thousands of birds and fish at the Salton Sea almost yearly.

The outbreak usually holds off at least until August when, in the past, dozens of Orange County residents have turned out to help the animals. The worst year to date: 1996, when an estimated 20,000 birds died between August and December, including 20 percent of California's endangered brown pelicans.

Brown pelicans have already begun arriving at the Pacific Wildlife Project in Irvine, where volunteers are struggling to save their lives. Linda Evans, who runs the project, says she needs more volunteers--fast. "We anticipated we'd get pelicans again this year, but not this soon, so we weren't quite ready for them yet," Evans said Monday. "We really need volunteers. Looks like we could be facing another big outbreak this year."

She had no explanation for the cause of the outbreak's early onset, but said numerous studies are under way to search for causes and solutions to the pollution at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. Volunteers cannot be faint of heart, said Patricia McPherson, a project spokeswoman. "It's hard, dirty, labor-intensive work that must go on around the clock" to stop the botulism, which causes paralysis in the birds, then kills them.

Volunteers mix formula, clean cages and work in teams to feed the birds, both for nutrition and to help flush the botulism from their systems.

To volunteer or donate to the effort, call (949) 440-6247 or e-mail: lin4pelican@earthlink.net.

"If the birds are not rescued, they will die," McPherson said, "Everyone needs to ask their congressman to help clean up the Salton Sea."