

Volunteers needed to help save stricken pelicans

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Irvine World News

The pelicans need help and Pacific Wildlife Project has put out an urgent call for volunteers. Help is needed to care for sick birds being trucked in from the Salton Sea to the Irvine Animal Care Center, where Pacific Wildlife Project is located. Help is also needed for work with birds and cleanup at Salton Sea.

An outbreak of avian botulism is downing endangered brown pelicans as well as white pelicans and other fish-eating birds at the lake in the desert about 80 miles northeast of San Diego. The disease causes paralysis and death and has been known to wipe out whole breeding flocks of birds.

Pelicans at the shelter show the whole range of symptoms. The "pancakes" lay helplessly in small pens, weakly moving their wings. These have lost the ability to hold up their heads that rest on bumpers with the long bills lying awkwardly on the floor of the cage. Volunteers must tube-feed the birds, flush the toxins through their systems and clean them up round-the-clock.

"A surprising number of these birds recover," said Linda Evans, project director. "You would never think it possible to look at them when they come in."

"Belly birds" cannot stand but can hold up their heads. "Standing birds" can stand but cannot fly. Healthy birds, according to volunteer Gene Brady of Irvine, are fairly aggressive and snap their beaks at workers. All the sick birds just sit there and would be easy prey to predators in the wild.

Most of the pelicans are set free as soon as they recover. They are not returned to the Salton Sea, but are freed along the coast.

Monday afternoon the center had received about 55 brown pelicans. Brown pelicans are smaller, weighing 38 to 40 pounds, according to Brady. as many as 49 bird species have been affected by the outbreaks at the Salton Sea in the past.

Outbreaks of avian botulism at the Salton Sea used to be cyclical, coming around ever five to ten years, but the disease seems to have become an annual occurrence, according to Evans.

This year's outbreak is also about six weeks earlier than usual, said volunteer Karen Schoenholtz of Irvine. The group expected to treat pelicans this year but was not quite ready when birds started getting sick. Birds started arriving at the treatment facility last week with trucks expected every day now.

"It looks like it may be a pretty bad outbreak this year," Evans noted.

Pesticide fish kills have been blamed for botulism outbreaks at the polluted Salton Sea in the past. Pollution may be contributing this time, said Evans, but scientists are finding some other puzzling factors as well.

They have found active toxin in the gut of living fish. Thus birds are becoming ill after eating live fish rather than just dead fish, which are piling up along the shore of the lake. There also seems to be some relationship with infection by two other bacterial diseases, said Evans.

"Scientists don't know what's going on yet," she said. "It's scary."

High temperatures also contribute to conditions that make it ideal for botulism outbreaks. Temperatures have been in the 105-110 degree range at the Salton Sea.

Volunteers are going out daily in boats at the lake to retrieve sick and dead birds. Endangered brown pelicans are among the first species to sicken. Many of the birds that are brought in are young birds.

The Pacific Wildlife Project is a leading sea bird care facility in California. Veterinarian Richard Evans, medical director of the project, has pioneered botulism treatment for pelicans and other sea bird species. He is the medical director for the Salton Sea botulism outbreaks. The organization works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Caught early enough, the endangered pelicans and other rescued birds have a high recovery rate with round-the-clock care by

volunteers who help feed the birds and flush the toxin through the birds' system.

"The birds must be retrieved and treated for any chance of survival," Linda Evans said.

There is no danger to human beings and other mammals from the avian botulism. This toxin does not affect humans, she added.

Anyone willing to help at the Irvine facility or the Salton Sea can call the Pacific Wildlife Project at (949) 440-6247 or e-mail lin4pelican@earthlink.net.