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She Swoops In to Help Starving Pelicans Survive

■Orange County woman has been nursing sick birds for years. Now her home has become a recovery facility.

By Dave McKibben, Times Staff Writer

Linda McLeod's Pacific Wildlife Project has been a sick pelican's best friend for 20 years.

Now that friendship is getting its stiffest test yet: A few days after Pacific Wildlife lost its lease at the expanding Irvine Animal Care Center, starving brown pelicans began turning up on Orange County beaches.

Since McLeod doesn't have a facility to care for them, she invited them into her Laguna Niguel house.

"The timing couldn't be worse," she said. "But how can you walk away from that? There's no other facility for treatment in south Orange County. What choice do I have? All of these birds would die."

Some of the ailing pelicans have died from starvation and injuries, but McLeod has saved more than 30 at her makeshift recovery facility and sent them on to a state-funded bird rescue and recovery center in San Pedro.

The Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center in Huntington Beach has saved and released about half of the two dozen sick birds it has treated. An additional 130 pelicans have been found on San Diego County's beaches and taken to the avian rescue center at Sea World.

McLeod said starving young pelicans also began showing up on the county's beaches in the early 1990s after an El Niño weather pattern. Bird experts have been unable to explain the current phenomenon, but McLeod is blaming El Niño again.

"The fish go deeper or farther out when the water's warm, so that doesn't give the young pelicans enough to eat," McLeod said. "And the young ones are the worst fishermen because they're so inexperienced, which is why the fish shortage hits them that much harder."

"The bulk of the birds are failing in San Diego before they get up this far. There's a current that the birds follow and it comes all the way up to Orange County. It's

an unusual event for Orange County, and ominous."

McLeod said the malnourished birds began showing up near and in Orange County about July 1, from San Onofre to mid-Laguna Beach. Since then, she has been treating up to 10 starving pelicans a day. Rescue volunteers and lifeguards have helped locate the birds, but McLeod said she needs more help.

"My three or four volunteers are running their legs off all day," she said.

The sickest birds are being fed liquid formula through a tube. The healthier birds are fed bait-sized fish. Adult pelicans weigh about 9 pounds and have a wingspan of more than 6 feet. First-year birds weigh about 6 pounds.

The Wildlife Care Center in Huntington Beach has been picking up underweight pelicans along north Orange County beaches since May.

Susanna Kraig, a wildlife technician at the 4-year-old facility, said the birds she treats are one-third to one-half of a first-year pelican's normal weight. "It's really baffling," she said. "There's nothing that red flags a certain kind of disease their parents had. It might just be young birds learning to fish and not enough fish out there."

At Sea World, tissue samples from deceased birds have been sent to laboratories run by the state and federal governments and the UC Davis veterinary school. Among other things, laboratory tests will look for signs of West Nile virus.

The California brown pelican, recognized by its long pouched bill and ungainly appearance, is a water bird that thrives on rocky shores, cliffs and coastal river deltas — catching fish by swooping into the water at high speed from 20 to 60 feet.

The federal government listed the California brown pelican as endangered in 1970; the state followed a year later. In 1997, about 150 brown pelicans died at the Salton Sea in Imperial County as a result of chronic avian botulism.

The pelicans' two major breeding colonies are in Channel Islands National Park and the Sea of Cortez in Mexico. Every year, they migrate to the Southern California coast.

"They come here for the same reason the rest of us like it," McLeod said. "The weather's nice and the water's inviting."