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Pelicans' Helping Hands

by: Michael Luo

They have been arriving here literally by the truckload since Saturday: brown pelicans, each in various stages of distress, stricken by deadly botulism.

They are quickly assessed and assigned to care wards according to need. The most acute cases are placed in a separate room. There they languish, heads propped up by pillows and long curved necks bent grotesquely.

There is no cure for the disease that is causing the latest summer die-off of the endangered bird at the Salton Sea southeast of Palm Springs. Biologists at the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, who also are coping with a simultaneous mass die-off of fish, have been finding the birds floating listlessly in the water or along the shore and sending them to an animal shelter in Irvine, 60 in all so far.

Volunteers from the Pacific Wildlife Project, a nonprofit group that specializes in the rehabilitation of sea birds, can only flush out toxins, feed them a homemade formula of electrolytes and vitamins and hope for the best.

The first botulism outbreak in 1996 killed an estimated 1,500 brown pelicans nearly 20% of the West Coast population still living in the wild. About 9,000 white pelicans, which are not endangered, also died.

Scientists were at first unsure of the cause of the outbreak.. What they did know was that the bacterial spores that cause botulism are normally dormant until activated by a combination of heat, wind and oxygen in the environment.

The current theory is that botulism first afflicts Salton Sea fish, consuming their insides with a poisonous toxin. The pelicans are then infected after eating the fish.

It's unclear how the botulism outbreak is related to the Salton Sea fish die-off that occurs every summer when the water is depleted of oxygen. Nearly 8 million fish died in a single day last week. Every year since 1996, similar bird die-off have occurred in the salty waters,

though not as severe as last year. Last year marked the best year yet for the birds, with only about 200 pelicans dying.

"This year, the rate and early onset of the die-off has alarmed some, who fear that they might be on the verge of a repeat of the carnage three years ago.

"It's happening like it did in 1996," said Linda Evans, executive director of the wildlife project. "It's happening with a vengeance."

Clark Bloom, manager of the Salton Sea wildlife refuge, cautions against undue alarm.

"It's too early to tell," he said.

But he admitted; "Things are getting worse. They're certainly worse than a year ago. And they're certainly approaching the worst of 1997."

Refuge staffers have patrolled the waters for the last three weeks. They focus on the ones still swimming. Those that make it to shore are usually the ones without much hope.

"They're going to die," Bloom said simply. "There's nothing you can do."

About 120 birds have died so far, with 170 found sick and sent to wildlife rehabilitation facilities like the one in Irvine. On Thursday, 17 birds arrived for treatment at the makeshift pelican hospital. A walk inside the dimly lit facility is an assault upon the senses. A cacophony of dogs barking next door makes it difficult to hear, and a stench of fish and birds permeates everything. Caged stalls lined the sides. Inside, pelicans in two or threes recuperate.

The birds are classified in three grades, depending on their condition: "pancake," "belly," and "standing." Pancake birds are the most critical cases, their neurological systems completely paralyzed by the disease, unable to lift their heads or even blink. Belly birds are those able to lift their heads but unable to stand. Standing birds are those in the best shape, able to stand and even flap their wings mightily when volunteers wrestle their bills open and shove fish down their long throats once daily.

The work isn't glamorous by any means, but volunteers say it is immensely rewarding. Although the sickest pelicans have a 30% mortality rate, more than 85% of the others are successfully released.

"You find them, nurture them, hope for the best for them," volunteer Jackie Jennings said. "If they die, it's kind of heartbreaking. But the ones that live make it worth it."