

People Magazine
November 30, 1992

Under Her Wing

Linda Evans makes the rounds of her Laguna Niguel, Calif., clinic and smiles at one of her patients. Itchy is a brown pelican injured by an unknown human assailant who poured boiling liquid on his head. Healing nicely, he nudges his long gnarled beak out between the bars of his cage in hopes of getting a tidbit. In the cages around Itchy are other wounded pelicans--Smikey, Linus, Ollie, Nero and Biff. "They have a watery-eyed expression that makes them look comical and helpless," says Evans. "You almost feel compelled to hug them."

Despite their protected status under the Endangered Species Act, brown pelicans have had a tough time coexisting with people recently. This year the number of battered pelicans found along the Southern California coast has reached epidemic proportions as warm ocean currents have forced them closer to shore in search of food. Since January, Evans has treated nearly 500 injured birds. While most were inadvertently snared by fishing lines or hooks, some 50 have been victimized by cruel humans. Others have been killed outright. In March a young bird was crucified on a light pole. Metal pins were driven through its soft gullet and wings.

Fishermen annoyed at having to compete with pelicans for a limited catch are thought to have maimed some of the birds. But Paul Chang, a special agent for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, suspects nonfishermen may be responsible for the worst mutilations--cases in which a pelican has its bill severed and suffers starvation unless it is put to sleep. "There are some sick people out there," he says. Luckily, there is also a network of kindhearted people who retrieve injured seabirds and bring them to the Pacific Wildlife Project, the clinic founded in 1986 by Evans and her husband, Richard, chief of veterinary services for Orange County. With the help of scores of volunteers, Evans nurses the casualties back to health in the garage and backyard of their three-bedroom home. "It's a glamorous life," she jokes. "The last time we took any time off was three years ago, when we visited animal shelters in Colorado."

Though one man was sentenced in August to 10 days of public service for clubbing a pelican to death, Evans says she longs for the day an abuser receives the \$5,000 fine and six-month jail term allowed under federal law. "Let's hope there are tattletales out there

waiting to finger people." she says. "That would restore my faith in humanity."