

FREE TO FLY: Steve DePalma of the Pacific Wildlife Project in Laguna Niguel oversees release of pelicans Thursday from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service vehicle at Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge. The project nursed the birds back to health.

16 more brown pelicans gain freedom after regaining health

WILDLIFE: The endangered birds are released at Seal Beach after being saved from a botulism outbreak.

By **ANN PEPPER**
The Orange County Register

SEAL BEACH -- Sixteen endangered California brown pelicans poisoned more than a month ago in the massive Salton Sea botulism outbreak stretched their wings Thursday and rode a stiff onshore breeze home to the Pacific Ocean.

It was the first large release from among the nearly 700 California browns rescued by state and federal wildlife workers at the lake and cared for by volunteers at the Pacific Wildlife Project in Laguna Niguel. The outbreak has killed 11,302 birds of all kinds.

"I've never watched a release before," volunteer Carol Allison said, tears streaming down her face as the newly freed birds splashed about in the ocean. "We couldn't have asked for anything better than this."

Watching the birds go was the payoff for volunteers, who have made 36, 400-mile trips to Salton Sea to pick up sick pelicans. The birds require almost constant medicating, cleaning and feed. Of the 700 pelicans sent to the project, about 80 percent are expected to recover.

Two smaller releases of pelicans were made last week to gauge their reaction to the environment at the Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge.

"These releases are always difficult for me," said Richard Evans, a Pacific Wildlife Project veterinarian. "I couldn't bear to see one of the birds flap into the water and go sneakers up." The refuge provides ideal pelican habitat, said Evans, also chief veterinarian for Orange County Animal Control. He's hoping they'll stay there.

"Pelicans are kind of monkey see, monkey-do types," he said. "We're hoping they'll see others already at the refuge and decide this must be the thing to do."

As more pelicans recover, they'll be set free at Seal Beach and three other spots along the coast, including near Treasure Island mobile-home park in Laguna Beach.

The number of sick and dead birds found at Salton Sea began to fall this week, a sign that the outbreak may be winding down, said David Klinger, spokesman for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. About 8,264 pelicans, including 1,041 browns, have died since the outbreak began five weeks ago.

Thursday, however, everyone was there to see the release of some of the survivors.

"Oh, look at him, look at him," volunteer Patti Balch said as she watched the first bird head into the water. "He looks so happy."