

Brown Pelicans arriving injured and malnourished

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Brown Pelicans have been making the news following concerns from experts over an influx of birds that are showing signs of emaciation and injury. Normally migrating North this time of year from their Winter homes in Southern California and Mexico, the Brown Pelicans should be making their way to their yearly breeding grounds.

Instead, researchers on the coast of Northern California and Southern Oregon have found hundreds of birds emaciated from hunger or stranded from injury. At current, experts have two prevalent theories for why this is occurring: food inaccessibility and late-Spring storms.

Representatives from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife have stated that their strongest theory is a combination of the two. With many storms hitting the coast, wind speeds have been harder to manage, and waters have been choppy than usual.

This has led biologists to believe that the pelicans simply cannot reach the fish below-surface that they normally would rely on. Rescuers with the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center at the SPCA in Monterey Bay have observed that birds are arriving at half their normal weight. Most of the rescue calls they have received have been on piers and public docks.

This is a bad sign, as pelicans should be naturally wary of humans and normally seek their meals at sea. Instead, many pelicans are targeting marinas and docks as easy sources of food, with fishing vessels often unloading their hauls.

Experts say that a sure sign of a pelican potentially in need of rescue is their willingness to let you approach. If there is a pelican near you, and it is not wary of your presence, odds are there's something wrong and a local wildlife center should be contacted.

Jason Badger, an Assistant District Wildlife Biologist with the ODFW, has observed similarly concerning signs along the South Coast, attributing most of what he's seen to storms as well.

"One thing that stands out, locally at least, is the number of 'stranded' pelicans we're seeing and receiving reports of this spring. The majority of these appear to be juvenile birds and I suspect it has a lot to do with the high wind events we're experiencing along the coast," stated Badger.

These late storms cause more harm than just reducing the pelicans' access to food. High winds, especially when blowing counter to the migration routes they are following, can cause the pelicans enormous difficulty with flying. The younger a pelican is, the less likely they'll be able to fight against the wind current.

"These birds are migrating into the predominant northwest wind, and it appears some of the juveniles are becoming fatigued. I even responded to a call of a pelican that appeared injured, but it turns out its wings were twisted around each other twice, like a garbage bag tie," observed Badger.

While Badger was able to help that troubled pelican, who quickly recovered, the Brown Pelican in general, which saw a miraculous resurgence in numbers in the later half of the 20th century, are once again an Oregon Conservation Strategy Species. In the past, their population was affected by a toxic chemical that had entered coastal waters, causing their eggs to be too fragile for incubation. Since the banning of that chemical (DDT), the pelicans' recovery was positive, even to the point of falling off the endangered species list in 2009.

Since then, abnormal weather events in the Brown Pelicans' breeding grounds have caused another huge decline in population. In the current climate, Brown Pelicans are back on Oregon's list of endangered species.

Anyone who spots a pelican that seems distressed, malnourished, or injured should contact their local wildlife authority as soon as possible. These majestic birds are emblematic of the natural wonder of the

South Coast and should be protected in this difficult period for the species.