

Scientists continue to seek cause of California brown pelican illness

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Since approximately May 13, several Southern and Central California wildlife rehabilitation facilities from San Luis Obispo County south to San Diego County have been admitting hundreds of California brown pelicans, a fully protected species in California. The pelicans have been found emaciated and frequently with secondary injuries or broken wings. Many of these birds died shortly after arrival at a facility. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), local wildlife rehabilitation facilities and other state partners are coordinating to assess the ongoing situation.

CDFW is conducting postmortem examination and testing on pelicans that have been brought into rehabilitation facilities. Results indicate that pelicans are succumbing to starvation-related problems. Currently, there are no indications of disease or unusual parasites. CDFW is unable to provide information on the underlying cause of this event at this time.

For your safety - and that of the birds - CDFW, USFWS and wildlife rehabilitation facilities ask the public to not touch, attempt to feed, or take photographs (“selfies”) with the birds. Please do not attempt to remove fishing lines or embedded fishing hooks from entangled birds as this may cause further injury.

Here’s how you can help

- Report an injured or sick pelican. Call your local wildlife rehabilitation facility and email the Wildlife Health Laboratory at RehabWildlife@wildlife.ca.gov.
- Report dead pelicans using the CDFW’s Wildlife Health Laboratory mortality reporting form to help monitor unusual mortality events.

Please include photos if possible.

- Support Wildlife Rehabilitation Facilities. Consider supporting one of the permitted facilities intaking brown pelicans and contact them directly for how to best assist.
- Support the Coastal Ocean Mammal and Bird Education and Research Surveys (BeachCOMBERS) program.

This collaborative project between Moss Landing Marine Laboratories, Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, USFWS, CDFW and other partners enlists trained volunteers to monitor unusual mortality events.

California brown pelicans need your help! This species was listed as federally endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1970 due to the impacts of DDT, a pesticide. After DDT was banned, they made a remarkable recovery and were removed from the endangered species list in 2009.

The brown pelican species plays an important role in the Pacific Coast ecosystem feeding on northern anchovy, Pacific sardine and mackerel.

CDFW, USFWS and partners will continue to track this unusual event. We value the public’s interest and appreciate all efforts to report.