

The New York Times

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January 16, 2009

In Pelican Mystery, Weather Is a Suspect

By [JESSE MCKINLEY](#)

FAIRFIELD, Calif. — What’s wrong with California’s pelicans?

More than 400 endangered California brown pelicans have been found dead or dying since late December, with disoriented and starving birds turning up on highways, in backyards and even in the Arizona desert.

Now, after an investigation with all manner of sinister theories — from bird flu to poisoning by lingering fire retardant used to fight the region’s wildfires — California fish and game officials say they are closing in on a more usual suspect: Mother Nature.

According to a preliminary report to be released Friday, many of the birds flooding West Coast animal hospitals and rescue centers were caught in a snowstorm and brutal cold snap on the Oregon-Washington border in mid-December, setting off an arduous and often life-threatening commute to warmer climes.

“Pelicans were observed in the middle of that storm and then seen moving south,” said David A. Jessup, senior wildlife veterinarian for the California Department of Fish and Game. About a week later, he said, ill birds started showing up on the California coast and inland.

The tip-off for scientists, said Mr. Jessup, was frostbite. “It was severe in a lot of cases,” he said. “There were legs, toes and pouches frozen off.”

Other causes of the pelicans’ distress — including man-made contamination or disease — were still being examined, Mr. Jessup said, adding that necropsy results on some birds from the United States [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) were pending. Initial tests have shown several birds with elevated levels of domoic acid, a neurotoxin that is generated by algae blooms and enters the food chain via algae-eating fish. But the cold seems the most likely explanation.

The mystery of the imperiled pelicans has been a hot topic up and down the Pacific Coast, where the birds have made a strong recovery after a near-extinction of the species in the 1970s, when pesticides, particularly DDT, weakened the shells of the birds’ eggs.

In recent years, brown pelicans have been thriving, with hundreds of birds — which can sport yellow, gray and brown plumage and a six-foot wingspan — seen perching on cliffs like Pelican Point in Pismo Beach, on California's central coast. The bird's recovery has been so successful that the federal government is considering taking the brown pelican off the endangered-species list.

But just before Christmas, animal rescue workers started to report a surge in pelicans appearing emaciated and near death. Many of the weakest birds died, and officials began post-mortems to see if a deadly new disease or contamination might be at work.

Jay Holcomb, the executive director of the International Bird Rescue Research Center, in Fairfield, Calif., said his medical center had treated about 150 birds in recent weeks. Mr. Holcomb said the surge in sick birds was alarming because most of the victims were adults, not the more vulnerable juveniles, and because the deaths of predators like pelicans, who dive for fish in shallow waters, can signal a larger environmental problem.

Then there was the pelicans' behavior.

"They were landing in odd places, on the road and parking lots, in the snow, some way inland," Mr. Holcomb said. "Adult birds don't do that."

The brown pelican's traditional turf is roughly from Northern California to Baja California in Mexico. In recent years, however, researchers say warmer weather and water, and plentiful sardines and anchovies, have led to pelican populations as far north as British Columbia.

Mr. Jessup said large flocks might have been caught off guard on East Sand Island in the Columbia River, where observers reported thousands of birds still roosting in early December.

Deborah Jaques, an Oregon wildlife biologist specializing in sea birds, said there might have been as many as 5,000 pelicans on the island when the storm hit, packing 60 mile-an-hour winds and temperatures below freezing.

"These birds were probably not subject to any thing like this in a hundred years," Ms. Jaques said.

Dan Anderson, an avian ecologist at the University of California, Davis, said that once exposed to snow and extreme cold, the birds have a "tough time drying off" if soaked.

"They get wet and cold, and that's the end of them," Mr. Anderson said.

Many of the birds at Mr. Holcomb's sanctuary, about 50 miles northeast of San Francisco, were on the mend, feeding on a steady diet of fish. "Once they feel better, they're starving," he said.

“They gorge, and we let them.”

And while the pelicans’ odd behavior probably confused the initial hunt for a cause, Mr. Jessup said it was understandable.

“They’d just flew a thousand miles and had their tails frozen off,” he said. “They probably weren’t feeling so well.”

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