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Pelicans hit by major die-off

By Sue Jepsen, The Oregonian

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Hundreds of California brown pelicans that summer in Oregon and may have waited too long to head south are turning up dead along the West Coast from here to Mexico in what officials say is escalating into a massive die-off.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife
Service

Brown pelican

The mouth of the Columbia River houses the largest colony of the endangered pelican species for a nonbreeding site. But some biologists suspect many of the birds were caught by the same December Arctic storm that wreaked havoc across the Northwest, leaving them weak and malnourished as they started their migration to breeding sites in California and Mexico.

The **International Bird Rescue Research Center** in California has recorded more than 460 dead or ailing brown pelicans in the past month, spokeswoman Rebecca Dmytryk said Wednesday. It's common for some young birds to die as winter sets in, but close to half of the dead or injured pelicans are adults that are well-tested and typically strong enough to survive.

"These are proven animals," Dmytryk said. "It's very unusual to have a die-off of adults."

The affected birds are behaving strangely, straying far inland and to high elevations where they have rarely been seen. They appear disoriented and frail, often with injuries to their feet and the distinctive pouches underneath their bills. Some have tested positive for domoic acid, a toxin associated with algae blooms and that can accumulate in shellfish.

This was a record year for California brown pelicans in Oregon, with Oregon State University teams counting 12,395 at the mouth of the Columbia River in September, said Dan Roby, an OSU professor who studies the birds. But the pelicans stayed later than usual, with thousands lingering in mild fall weather into December.

Then came the icy blast that dumped snow across the region.

"They probably waited too late to leave and then made a rush down in the teeth of that storm and miscalculated," Roby said. The fall weather may have misled them into staying. "It wasn't until December when it really hit, and then it hit in spades."

Birds caught in the storm might have been stressed and then had a more difficult time finding food as they struggled into California, he said. That could explain the strange behavior of the disoriented birds. The domoic acid in some of the birds may be a sign they were scrounging for any food they could find.

"Nutritional stress can cause a lot of strange behavior," Roby said. "It may cause them to eat things they wouldn't otherwise eat."

Pelicans congregate at the mouth of the Columbia because the area holds plentiful fish. They usually arrive in large numbers through July and August, with numbers peaking in September or October, Roby said.

Biologists are not sure why the birds stay longer in some years, as they did last year, said Roy Lowe, manager of the Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The species, while endangered, is bouncing back strongly and has been proposed for removal from the list of threatened and endangered species.

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