

Sick, starving pelicans hit West Coast — again

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Sick and starving pelicans are once again appearing along the West Coast by the hundreds, filling bird rescue centers and sometimes begging food from people on affected beaches.

It's the second year in a row that starving birds, possibly victims of sudden cold weather and vanishing prey, have descended on the West Coast in droves.

About 30 pelicans were being treated Wednesday at the [Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center](#), said wildlife director Debbie McGuire.

"The pelicans are coming in hungry and weak," McGuire said. "We're not giving them any medication, other than nutrition, and they're coming along, doing just fine."

McGuire also was dealing with at least four birds rescued from an oil spill in a Huntington Beach flood control channel; six others had been at the center but were sent to another care facility.

The onslaught of sick pelicans for a second year is raising difficult questions for rescuers: Is it a natural phenomenon, or can the cause be traced back to humans?

"Are we messing with nature if we help these birds?" asked Rebecca Dmytryk of [WildRescue](#), a bird rescue group in central California. "Or has man messed up their nature, and we should help them?"

Last year, a sudden cold snap off the Oregon coast was blamed for causing frostbite and malnutrition among large numbers of pelicans, many of which then made their way south.

This year, many of the brown pelicans, a species recently removed from the endangered list, lingered along the Oregon coast far later in the year than normal, something that has been happening increasingly over the past three years, said Roy Lowe, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and project leader for wildlife refuges along the Oregon coast.

The pelicans took advantage of abundant fish until downwelling — a fall and winter phenomenon in which surface water is carried deeper — reduced the nutrients available. The fish left the area and the lingering pelicans began to starve. The birds also were pummeled by a series of powerful storms off Oregon, Lowe said.

Many that tried to migrate south arrived in Southern California depleted and exhausted. Rescuers say the sick birds have been appearing over the past three weeks, possibly in a wave moving south with more arriving now in Southern California.

The sick and dying birds have turned up from Newport, Oregon to San Diego.

While the shifts in prey and ocean conditions could be linked to climate change, Lowe and other scientists say there is not enough data to make a firm connection.

"Ask me 20 years from now," he said. "It's plausible that it's associated with changes in the ocean that are associated with climate change, but there's just no way to know that right now."

Necropsies — the animal equivalent of autopsies — were performed on 18 of the Oregon birds by Deborah Jaques, a wildlife biologist and pelican specialist who owns the Pacific Eco Logic consulting firm.

"Most of these dead I've opened up have no fat reserves, so starvation seems to be the biggest factor," she said.

In some areas where pelicans normally shy away from people, they instead have been approaching beachgoers to beg for food.

In one pelican stomach, she found a chicken bone, suggesting people are giving the pelicans improper food.

Another pelican that became a nuisance at a shrimp processing plant was beaten to death with a shovel, she said.

Feeding the pelicans is an enormous expense, said McGuire of the Huntington Beach rescue center; she asks anyone wishing to make a donation to go to [the group's Web site](#), or call at **714-374-5587**.