Success for Orphaned Mountain Quail

By Cambria Wells, Wildlife Technician Supervisor

raising young birds presents unique challenges. In order to release a healthy bird, as rehabilitators we have to consider many factors which influence their physical and mental fitness for life in the wild. We need to know what each orphan needs to be able to do to care for themselves, attract a mate, and someday raise young of their own. Do they innately know their own song, or do we need to find a way for them to hear an adult of their species? Do they forage for insects on the ground, or catch them while flying? Do they have an attraction to specific habitats, food items, or self-maintenance opportunities like water or dust baths? For answers to these kinds of questions, we look to natural history, to the story of how these animals have lived in our local environments for thousands of years. We are lucky to have access to research and writing by rehabilitators, ornithologists, veterinarians, and more on our side in our quest to return our patients to the wild. For species that don’t regularly come into care, that research can bridge the gap between our standard protocols and a happy ending for the most vulnerable of species.

In early June of this year, a good Samaritan rescued eight hatchling Quail running alone on the side of the road in Hungry Valley State Vehicular Recreation Area. These birds were very young, bearing only downy feathers, and were initially identified as California Quail. When they arrived a few days later at California Wildlife Center, staff noticed confident demeanors, dark-colored bills, and subtle plumage differences that set these Quail apart from the hatchling California Quail in care at the time. A little research and help from the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History, led to the determination that these were likely Mountain Quail, a species for which CWC has no record of previous intake at our facility.

As their name suggests, Mountain Quail primarily occupy mountainous chaparral habitat from Washington to Baja California, migrating seasonally to avoid heavy snows and enjoying a wide range of foods such as seeds, fruits, flowers, leaves, and insects. A correct identification allowed Orphan Care staff to infer that these Quail might, as compared to the California Quail we were more familiar with, have a high degree of herbivory, eating more plants than other local Quail species. Therefore, they were offered plentiful amounts of fresh greens. Knowledge of their habitat preferences in the wild allowed us to fill enclosures inside and outside with dense brush to help them feel safe and learn to hide from potential predators. Existing research on their habits and behaviors meant that we could be confident that toe injuries three of the Quail had sustained before intake at our Center would not, once fully healed, interfere with their ability to walk, perch, or forage for food. They were able to grow and thrive under care tailored to their specific needs.

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Unusual Rescue Calls
By the Marine Mammal Team

Our marine mammal team performs the majority of our rescues between February and May each year. Generally, winter and summer reports are for California Sea Lions in distress, and spring is heavily weighted with Elephant Seals in need of our help. Along with these, we had a few noteworthy responses this season.

In February a seven-month-old Guadalupe Fur Seal stranded on Leo Carrillo beach, lethargic and severely malnourished. Guadalupe Fur Seals are listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In the 1970s the Marine Mammal Protection Act was put into legislation and while it aided California Sea Lions and Northern Elephant Seals, Guadalupe Fur Seal populations remain low. Further complicating their recovery, since 2015, these Seals have been experiencing an Unusual Mortality Event, high die-off numbers without a clear cause. Each year we may only receive one call for Guadalupe Fur Seals, whereas a typical year will bring 297 of calls for other marine mammals. For ESA species like these, special permitting is required to perform long-term rehabilitative care; thus we stabilized the patient then transferred her to the appropriate facility for the remainder of her treatment.

Two Elephant Seals stranded in Malibu this July. The timing of this event is unusual because in our region elephant seals strand in high numbers during March and April, with a few stragglers in May and June. CWC has never responded to a malnourished elephant seal pup in the month of July, let alone two, until this year. We were able to stabilize both and offer them a chance to thrive. It is unclear why they beached this late. It is possible a late birth set them back.

The most unique response this year was for a recently expired Thresher Shark on Carbon Beach in August. This is a relatively rare sighting, as they tend to be a pelagic, or offshore species. Seeing one up close is a memorable experience. While not a marine mammal, our team responded to the report of the beached shark. After confirming it was dead, we reached out to the California State University Long Beach Shark Lab. The shark biologists mentioned that there had been a handful of Thresher shark strandings along the California coastline during the same week, and they were collecting the animals to examine and hopefully determine the reason for this unusual activity.

We continue to be available throughout the year to help animals like these as well as our usual response for marine mammals and water birds at the beaches of Malibu.

Welcome to Dr. Guthrum Purdin
By Jennifer Brent, Executive Director

We are excited to welcome Dr. Guthrum Purdin as our new Veterinarian in October. He is a renowned wildlife rehabilitator and authority on the animals of California. Guthrum is no stranger to CWC either, having worked at CWC in 2001, one of our earliest years.

More recently, he was at the Wildlife Care Association in Sacramento as their Wildlife Veterinarian and as the Veterinarian at the Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley. He also served as Director of Veterinary Services for Lindsay Wildlife Experience until 2017. Guthrum worked at The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, where he was active for 18 years. With over 20 years of experience with wild animals, we are fortunate to have hired such an exceptional veterinarian. Guthrum has his BS in Marine Biology from San Francisco State University and his DVM from the University of California, Davis.

Guthrum is also a well-known author of several authoritative chapters in reference books for the industry and is considered an expert in the rearing of several species of songbirds. Dr. Purdin teaches wildlife medicine through both lectures and writing and has contributed to books and scientific papers. Most recently, he co-wrote and co-edited the fourth volume of National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association’s “Topics in Wildlife Medicine” manual on Orthopedics.

Prior to working with animals professionally, Guthrum made his living as a jeweler and then a movie propmaker in Hollywood, before deciding to pursue a full-time career in veterinary medicine and wildlife rehabilitation.

We very much look forward to having this highly esteemed and experienced Veterinarian on our team.

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The Climbing Fox
By Cori Carlson, Administrative Assistant

Gray Foxes may be named for their gray coats, but they also have a distinctive reddish-brown coloring along their sides and long bushy tails. The most common Fox in California, they live in woodland and forested areas in a range that runs all the way from southern Canada to South America. So far this year, California Wildlife Center has admitted two of the young Foxes. Last year we had a total of five Gray Foxes in care.

The first Fox arrived at the end of April with a hook embedded in his left front leg and a skin tear on the right front leg. These injuries were operated on and healed in about three weeks. In mid-May, we received a healthy, but orphaned second Fox. While these patients are in our care, wildlife technicians provide enrichment activities such as hiding food in boxes for the Foxes to open and search through. We also release live crickets to help them hone their hunting skills. It is important to try to make the enclosures as much like the animal’s home in the wild as possible. One of our technicians used branches and rods to create opportunities for the pups to climb and practice scaling trees.

Like cats, Gray Foxes have the ability to retract their claws and are the only member of the fox family who can climb trees. This unique ability allows them to escape predators and helps them gain an advantage over their prey. They have vertical pupils enabling them to see and hunt in the dark. Their keen eyesight, along with their excellent hearing, comes in handy as they do most of their hunting at night.

As omnivores, the Gray Fox’s diet includes fruits, plants, rabbits, rodents, squirrels, crickets, grasshoppers, and scavenged animals.

Gray Foxes have their kits in April. By the time those pups are four months old, they have learned to hunt with their parents and are ready to forage independently. By the fall, the young Foxes typically leave as they have reached maturity and are ready to start their own families. We plan to release our two Fox patients in the fall as well.