



WildTimes

Spring 2023

Dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of Southern California's sick, injured and orphaned wildlife

Backyard Birds

By Denys Hemen, Hospital Manager

Having a yard is a privilege in the city. If you are fortunate enough to enjoy one at your home, it only takes a few minutes to put down your phone, be very still, and enjoy the nature around you. You may see tiny birds hiding in a bush, a squirrel high up in a tree, a soaring hawk or a gliding crow may pass overhead. Just going outside can bring you closer to nature. Nature is all around us and as humans develop lands farther and farther into open spaces, we are going to share our space more often with the creatures that live among us. One group of animals feeling the negative effects of human encroachment a little more than others are small songbirds. Most populations are on the decline and could use some help. Here are some easy ways to make your yard bird friendly and lend a hand to our feathered friends.

If you choose to have a bird feeder or waterer in your yard, please keep it clean. Take feeders down and discard leftover seed at least every two weeks, scrub with soapy water then rinse well. Make a solution of 9 parts water and 1 part bleach in a clean spray bottle and spray all parts. Leave the feeder sitting for ten minutes then rinse. Allow all items to air dry before refilling. If you provide water for wild birds the water should be changed daily, and the waterer should be sanitized in the same manner as the feeders every two weeks. If you ever see sick birds at your feeder, especially those with what looks like eye infections, take your feeder down, discard the seed, clean, sanitize, and leave it down for a week or two. Many bird diseases are easily transmitted through feeders and waterers.



Townsend's Solitaire

Hummingbird feeders should be cleaned and sanitized every time they are refilled, which should be every 3-5 days to prevent mold from growing. Do not use detergent to clean, only use boiling water and a bottle brush. Sanitize the same way as previously described. The only formula that should be fed to hummingbirds is 4 parts water to 1-part white granulated sugar. Boil the water until the sugar is dissolved, then let the formula come to room temperature before refilling.

Planting native plants is a fun way to attract more birds to your yard. In Southern California, the fall and early winter are prime times to get native plants into the ground. Choosing which plants birds like best can be tricky on your own. At calscape.org, you can find plants that are native to your specific zip code. Descriptions are included of what each plant will attract- from bees to bugs, butterflies to birds!

If you have trees in or around your yard, try to "leave the leaves" as much as possible. Leaves provide cover for tiny insects that birds such as towhees and Northern Mockingbirds love to scratch around and hunt for. Fallen leaves also make excellent mulch for your native plants. *(continued on page 2)*

Inside: A Tiny Tagged California Sea Lion Kicks Off the 2023 Rehabilitation Season, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

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In the spring and summertime, quickly walk your yard to look for fledgling birds on the ground before letting your dog out. Many bird species have young that leave the nest before they can fly. These fledglings spend a few days on the ground before they build the strength to fly and are very vulnerable.

If you have windows that birds repeatedly fly into there are many ways to fix this issue. A great resource for remedies is abcbirds.org. Here you can find dozens of ways to “bird proof” your windows. From iridescent bird tape to streamers, all the items suggested by this non-profit organization have been tested and rated.

The last and most important way to make your yard bird friendly is to always keep your cats inside and never feed strays around your home. Outdoor cats kill over a billion birds in the US each year. Cats are the number one cause of the decline of native songbird populations.

If you ever find an injured bird, place the bird in a cardboard box that has air holes and is lined with a paper towel. Then take a picture for species ID by our staff later. Give our hospital a call at 310-458-WILD and we will be happy to help you.

A Tiny Tagged California Sea Lion Kicks Off the 2023 Rehabilitation Season

By Heather Henderson, Marine Program Manager

Each winter CWC prepares for the imminent arrival of young sea lion pups in need of help. In nature, California Sea Lions are born in June, with over half of the births occurring on June 15th. This is because sea lions have synchronized reproduction, where individual animals breed, birth, and wean on the same schedule. Ideally sea lion pups should stay with their mothers until April and wean when they are ten months old. While with their mothers, young pups practice fishing and learn important life survival skills.

Unfortunately, not all sea lion pups are able to stay with their mothers until April. Overfishing has led to a decline in available food for sea lions, which often causes mothers to venture farther and farther away looking for fish. This abandonment can force young pups to venture off looking for food, and sometimes they end up on the beaches of Malibu in need of help.

Our first patient of the season was fortunate to be discovered hiding in the rocks on Westward beach. The young female was reported to our Marine Mammal Response Team by a group of caring Malibu residents who were taking advantage of a long awaited warm and clear day. This winter, unseasonably cold days and heavy rains have left local beaches very quiet. Minimal human activity is a positive for healthy wildlife, however it is a drawback for distressed wildlife that may go unnoticed.

The little pup arrived in a malnourished state (weighed only 10.1kgs, which is about 50% of the healthy weight for her age), but with a feisty attitude. This was an encouraging sign that she may respond well to care and be able to return to the wild after her stay in rehabilitation. An interesting detail: this pup came in already outfitted with identifying yellow flipper tags. Most pups do not have identifying markers at rescue since they are too young to have gone through rehabilitation and release. These yellow flipper tags, and all colors other than orange, are population study tags. From the tags, we now know that she was born on San Miguel Island. At release the yellow tag on her right flipper will be replaced with an orange rehab tag. In California, rehabilitated seals and sea lions are tagged on the right flipper if a female and on the left flipper if a male.

After just a few weeks, yellow tag pup was eating whole fish and beginning to gain weight and strength. She is continuing to improve and is playing with the other pups in our care. California sea lions are a gregarious species and seek out companions. While in care, it is essential that sea lion pups are housed with other pups or older sea lions to promote competition while foraging and deter bonding with humans.



Yellow Tagged Sea Lion Hiding in the Rocks on Westward Beach

We anticipate that the yellow tag pup may meet a dozen more sea lion pups in the coming weeks. In 2017, which was the most recent severe wet winter in Los Angeles, we stayed busy with the stranding season from January through June. Will this rainy winter prove to be busy for our Marine Mammal Team? Cooler sea surface temperatures that accompany La Nina weather patterns can lead to schools of prey closer to the surface, which is beneficial for newly weaned animals. Yet rough seas and cool rainy conditions quickly exhaust young and weak pups. If you observe a marine mammal that is skinny, injured, small or seems out of place, please do not approach, or touch them - Report to our rescue team. #310 458 WILD. Together we can give them a second chance to thrive!

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

By Dr. Guthrum Purdin, DVM

Avian influenza is a disease that has been infecting birds for over 150 years. The first documentation of the virus dates to 1878 in northern Italy, where it was described as a contagious disease affecting poultry. Historically avian influenza has had minimal impact on wild birds, but the most recent strain of the virus has had a detrimental effect on wildlife across the Americas. The disease is effectively 100% fatal for birds, and it has already caused the death of over 53 million wild and domestic animals in the United States alone.

The current strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) first arrived in North America late in 2021, appearing in eastern Canada. It was likely carried to Newfoundland from Eurasia by migratory waterbirds. Through 2022 it slowly made its way across the continent and the first west coast cases were found in Washington State late April/early May: a pair of Snow Geese and a Bald Eagle. By summer the contagion had reached the San Francisco Bay. Hundreds of wild birds are known to have died in the Bay Area, but fortunately for Southern California the southward advance of the disease was stalled there for the rest of the summer. HPAI does not tolerate hot, dry conditions well and last summer's heat may have helped protect our local birds.

Although many domestic poultry flocks have been affected, an unusual aspect of this particular H5N1 variant of HPAI is that it particularly affects a wide range of wild birds. Some species can carry it without showing symptoms while others get infected and die quickly. In Washington State, for example, one lake experienced the deaths of hundreds of geese. Even worse, along the coast of Peru, which until now had been free of HPAI, over 22,000 pelicans and other seabirds were lost to the contagion in December. Other animals too can be affected, including harbor seals, bobcats, foxes, even a black bear recently tested positive in the Pacific Northwest.

The staff at the California Wildlife Center had been closely monitoring the inexorable advance of HPAI as it came relentlessly closer to Los Angeles. We learned everything we could from the experiences of other wildlife rehabilitation groups in affected areas of the US, as well as those in Africa and Europe who have been dealing with both this H5N1 strain and multiple other variants of HPAI for many years. Working with hospital staff, as veterinarian I put together a comprehensive set of protocols for how to respond, knowing that HPAI's arrival in SoCal was inevitable. Of great importance was ensuring that HPAI positive animals not enter the general population of patients. If that happens, there is a high risk of it spreading through a busy wildlife hospital.

Now, when members of the public call about animal's they've found, they're asked a variety of questions to help identify possible HPAI patients. When they arrive on site, they're met by volunteers and staff wearing protective gear who bring the new patient to a specially designated screening room separate from the rest of the hospital where they are carefully checked for signs of avian influenza. After initial HPAI screening, patients free of overt clinical signs get a follow-up exam in our ICU to determine what injuries or non-influenza illness led to being rescued and a course of treatment is determined. During this, they are again evaluated for HPAI, since sometimes symptoms that are not immediately obvious can be caught on this second intake exam, especially subtle signs like milky looking eyes or a tendency to act “switched off”, like they're awake and standing but otherwise totally unresponsive to stimuli. After that they spend a day or two in strict quarantine and then a few days in isolation. HPAI is so virulent, that susceptible species usually present symptoms right away—however, in rare cases they may not show signs until later in care, hence the orderly set of exams and quarantine/isolation housing areas. This way we have a strong sense of a negative HPAI status before new admits are housed around patients already in care. Each area has disinfectant foot baths and appropriate levels of personal protective gear. Special foot coverings are worn when entering and leaving outdoor aviaries and caging to be extra careful, since animals housed outside could potentially be infected by HPAI positive birds flying overhead. (continued on page 4)

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In September, the inevitable happened, and CWC got its first positive HPAI patient, a Canada Goose with the severe neurological and visual deficits that are classic for HPAI birds. The disease was identified during physical exam and this goose was humanely euthanized to alleviate their suffering. The diagnosis of HPAI H5N1 was definitively confirmed with the assistance of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Wildlife Investigation Lab. Throughout the greater SoCal area numerous other cases have been identified among migratory birds, especially geese and raptors. So far, the horrifying mortality events seen in Europe, Peru and the Pacific north coast have not occurred here and winter cases have tapered off. CWC awaits the spring migration with trepidation, as birds already stressed by their far travels may be carrying HPAI back into our area. However, our hospital's thorough and decisive biosecurity protocols, as well as the keen vigilance of the treatment crew, have served well in protecting the hospital from an onsite outbreak. Another hot, dry summer after the winter rains would, in this case, be an added boon.

What can you do to help prevent the spread of this disease?

- If you handle birds, wash your hands carefully with soap and water.
- Avoid any contact between domestic poultry and wild birds.
- If you have outdoor chickens or other poultry, take down all bird feeders and bird baths.
- In general, bird feeders & bird baths should be cleaned and disinfected at least once a week.
- Keep pet birds indoors and away from other domestic or wild birds.
- If you might be handling sick birds or other wildlife, wear appropriate protection (like masks, gloves, and eye protection).
- Disinfect surfaces that have come in contact with birds or sick wildlife.