



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### January 20, 2023



Western Grebe on Beach

## Winter of Western Grebes

Western Grebes are the largest grebe species we see here at CWC. These striking birds are very distinct with their black backs, white undersides, and conspicuous red eyes. Every winter, flocks of Western Grebes migrate from their breeding grounds along the western states, Great Plains, and southern Canada to the Pacific Coast.

Western Grebes are able to survive in both fresh and salt water. During breeding season, the birds will build nests out of sticks and aquatic plants in deep lakes. After breeding season, Western Grebes migrate towards the Pacific. Some Western Grebes spend the winter months on freshwater lakes and rivers slightly inland, but the vast majority of these birds migrate to ocean shores and brackish habitats.



Western Grebe in Climate Controlled Enclosure

Along the coast of Southern California crude oil naturally oozes from the sea floor and makes its way to the water's surface and forms oil slicks. In fact, the Santa Barbara Channel is the site of the largest natural petroleum seep in the world. Once crude oil is exposed to the elements, it degrades to form tar which washes up onto the sand. Western Grebes who are unfortunate enough to come into contact with the oil or sticky tar are extremely unlikely to be able to survive on their own in the wild without human intervention. Grebes meticulously clean and align their feathers in order to provide waterproofing and insulation. Contamination mats down the feathers and misaligns them, leaving the birds vulnerable to hypothermia. The crude oil also reduces buoyancy in water since the feathers are no longer able to hold pockets of air. A grebe suffering from extensive contamination runs the risk of drowning.

Here at CWC we often receive calls in the winter about grebes who have hauled out on beaches after being contaminated with crude oil and tar. It is a common misconception that these birds need to be washed as soon as possible, when in reality the most critical first step in caring for contaminated birds is stabilization. When an oiled grebe arrives on site, staff and volunteers quickly get to work assessing the patient's vitals. Many times, these animals come in emaciated, dehydrated, lethargic, and hypothermic, and so staff will focus on providing patients with a warm enclosure and administering hydration. Nutritional support is also critical since contaminated Western Grebes have difficulty finding food and have often burned excessive calories attempting to stay warm.



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Once a Western Grebe is stable, they are transported to our partners at International Bird Rescue (IBR) in San Pedro for washing and continued care. IBR specializes in aquatic birds (and is a member of the Oiled Wildlife Care Network), and has a facility equipped with temperature-controlled washing areas, warm pools, and cold pools, in addition to various other customized enclosures. Contaminated birds are carefully washed, rinsed, dried, and monitored.

Even after a bird has been cleaned there are still various steps that need to happen in the rehabilitation process before they are considered a candidate for release. Aquatic birds need to be completely waterproof before they can survive in the wild. Birds waterproof their feathers by taking special oil from a gland near the base of the tail (called the uropygial gland) and carefully spread it along their feathers. After a wash, a patient will need to meticulously preen each feather into place and distribute the gland oil. Wildlife rehabilitators will carefully monitor feather quality and waterproofing during this time. Release is not considered until a patient has been fully waterproofed and given several days to rest and put on weight. Per IBR, "An oiled bird is released when it is completely stable, healthy, and when its waterproofing is determined to be flawless. An aquatic bird must be perfectly waterproof prior to release or it will not survive in the wild. The bird must exhibit normal feeding, swimming, and diving behavior, and have proper weight/blood values for their species."

If you find a Western Grebe (or any bird) that is oiled, contact CWC at 310-458-9453. You can do even more to help wildlife by donating at [cawildlife.org](http://cawildlife.org)!