



WildTimes

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

2023 Summer Domoic Acid Event – A Challenging Time for Hundreds of California Sea Lions

By Marine Mammal Program Manager, Heather Henderson

You may have seen California sea lions in the news recently. Starting in June, we have been experiencing an increase in sick sea lion calls all along the Southern California coast. What has caused this?

Upwelling ocean currents along the Southern California coastline bring nutrient-rich water to the surface. The upwelling mixes deep, cool water with warmer sea surface water, resulting in an explosion of growth when sunlight is present, supporting a wide diversity of ocean life. Along with healthy growth, toxic algal blooms can also flourish. Fed by fertilizer runoff, these poisonous blooms can experience dynamic growth.

Pseudo-nitzschia is a single celled plant that has a non-toxic and toxic variety. Concentrations build up in filter feeding fish and shellfish that are consumed by California sea lions. When in the toxic form, Pseudo-nitzschia is referred to as Domoic Acid and acts as a neurotoxin. The result on the body when ingested can vary from abnormal behavior to full-body seizures, and even death. As a sentinel species, sea lions are telling us (and lab analysis has confirmed) that Domoic Acid is at unusually high levels in the Pacific. In early June, we saw the beginning of this historic mass poisoning event.



California Sea Lion on Dan Blocker beach

The Domoic Acid bloom synced with the pregnancies of the California sea lions, as the majority give birth in June. To prepare for nursing their newborns, pregnant females consumed dozens of pounds of fish daily, bulking up and staying in top shape. However, this June, instead of traveling out to the Channel Islands, hundreds of adult females and their pups were knocked off course. After consuming large quantities of the neurotoxin, they ended up stranded on the mainland beaches, experiencing disorientation, seizures, and even dying as a result of consuming large quantities of contaminated fish.

During the five most severe weeks of this event, CWC's marine mammal team fielded over 800 reports of stranded California sea lions, performing 125 responses in Malibu. By comparison, a normal year will yield on average 15 responses during the same five-week timeframe.

What are the main challenges that accompany the response to a large toxic algal bloom? It arrives with little to no warning and intensifies within just a few days. Rescue programs quickly reach maximum capacity and are unable to admit every stranded animal as a patient, so triage and beach monitoring are implemented.

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Can sea lions survive this massive assault on their bodies? The fortunate answer is yes! Although a mentally and physically difficult time, there were numerous successes to celebrate throughout this event. All patients currently in care are no longer displaying seizure activity and are self-feeding. 75% of the California sea lions rescued during this event survived and have been released or are on track to be released.

How can you help?

Always give marine mammals space to relax on the beach, 50ft or more and report concerns of distressed animals to the stranding agency.

Volunteer at your local stranding center. Safety training is essential and can only be learned by working with trained professionals who are permitted to respond.

Donate to help purchase food and medicine for current and future events.

Lastly, help educate your neighbors.

If you are in Malibu and need to report a distressed marine mammal contact our Marine Mammal Rescue Team at (310) 924-7256.

Flycatcher Care at CWC: A Journey to Freedom

By Senior Wildlife Technician, Cambria Wells

Upon intake at CWC, baby birds range widely in age, health, and more. A critical task within their first few hours of admission is identifying their species, to begin to provide them with the appropriate care. Los Angeles is home to 518 species of native birds, many of which are especially similar in appearance while in their juvenile feathers. Even more are nearly identical in the first couple weeks of life; their featherless skin and underdeveloped bodies at this age may look very different from how we see them as young adults in our yards and parks.



Black Phoebe Nestling

Wildlife technicians at CWC use species photos, resources written by ornithologists and other rehabilitators, and years of experience to identify baby birds. Our Pacific-slope flycatchers made their basic needs known easily at arrival; these birds have wide, flat bills and compact bodies that make them easily recognizable as flycatchers. Specific species can be difficult to pin down at first, but a general identification allows staff to begin their care while determining species and subspecies later when time is made to consult our resources. After identification, staff and volunteers in the Orphan Care Unit can use that information to provide them with the specialized care they desperately need.

Most important to very young birds are their housing and dietary needs. Many flycatchers make “cup” nests which we mimic in our hospital; crocheted nests made and donated to CWC are placed into incubators for the youngest birds or those needing a little extra heat support. Older birds are housed in front of sunny windows in small enclosures with appropriate perching and leafy cover for their comfort. They are then hand fed whole insects at thirty- or forty-five-minute intervals by the OCU’s dedicated team of volunteers. How we achieve good nutrition depends on species; for some birds there is a commercial formula which we can use to suit their needs. Some require a homemade mix or blended formula of whole food items and vitamins. For birds on formula, this diet includes all their nutritional needs. For insectivores like our Pacific-slope Flycatchers, who receive a whole prey diet, we give special vitamins by mouth daily and pay close attention to the balance of their diet. Even the insects we feed them are carefully prepared by “gut-loading” with nutritious foods. This ensures our patients build strong bones, smooth well-structured feathers, and the appropriate colors to appear indistinguishable from their wild-raised cousins.



Pacific Slope Flycatcher Fledglings

As flycatchers grow and begin to leave the nest, we focus on enrichment and appropriate outdoor housing to ensure they learn

the skills they need for life in the wild. Outdoor aviaries for flycatchers like our Pacific-slope Flycatchers need to be relatively long compared to a different bird of a similar size, without too many obstructing branches, to allow them to practice their flight and build strong muscles. The branches themselves must be of various sizes to encourage the health of their feet as they perch. We also cultivate fruit flies using scraps from preparing diets for our other animals; by placing these fruit fly cultures into the aviaries; we create an opportunity for our flycatchers to practice living up to their name. With no parents to watch and follow, this experience is critical for their survival upon release. We assess our birds carefully as they grow and condition for release, ensuring they’ve learned survival skills appropriate for their natural history and life in the wild.

Though complex, raising baby birds and witnessing their growth into strong, independent, and unique patients is the greatest reward of working in our Orphan Care Unit. Volunteers and staff often remark that they never noticed a species near their home or when hiking until getting to know them at CWC; then, they see and hear them everywhere! Growing our skills in identifying and observing these birds in the wild and at CWC builds an incredibly rewarding relationship. It’s always good to get to know your neighbors.

Volunteers are Vital!

By Jasmine Regalado, Volunteer Coordinator

With a small staff and 4,300 patients admitted each year, it quickly becomes obvious how important volunteers are to California Wildlife Center (CWC). Volunteers may be the first point of contact for members of the public, rescuers on the beaches of Malibu, line cooks preparing a multitude of diets, or nurses helping to medicate patients. CWC volunteers are a group of passionate and extremely generous folks who make our facility run on all cylinders.

Our volunteers commit to a shift of four hours per week, on the same day and time every week, for a minimum of six months. This allows for consistency with their assigned team and ensures there is always coverage to care for our patients. We are incredibly lucky to have such committed folks—some of whom have been with us for over 10 years! There are a multitude of reasons why our volunteers choose CWC to donate their time to, but every single one of them is passionate about wildlife rehabilitation and conservation.

Each animal that arrives at CWC is received by a volunteer, examined by our hospital staff then cared for by staff and volunteers until they are ready for release. This can take anywhere from just a couple of weeks if the patient is an adult bird with minor injuries, to several months if they are an orphan or juvenile. Regardless of the time any animal spends at CWC, their well-being is of the utmost importance to us. Every patient receives the highest standard of rehabilitative care. Most of the patients require handfeeding and each will spend some time inside, which means that their enclosures must be changed out daily (at a minimum), and once outside volunteers assist with setting up enclosures to represent the outside world and to care for the patients as they prepare for release. For the 150+ species of animal, each needs a different diet based on their species and age—and those diets are meticulously created by our volunteers! Last year, our volunteers donated over 28,000 hours—incredible work by a group of 240 people.

Simply put, we would not be able to operate without the help of the extremely generous volunteers that donate their time, expertise, and passion for wildlife. We recognize and appreciate our volunteers and are incredibly lucky to have them work beside us. human caused, so it’s only fair that there exists some human interference to try and repair some of the damage.



Vet Volunteer Griselda assisting Dr. Purdin with hawk examination



Intern Austin preparing medications



Volunteer Susan assisting with administrative work



Interns Natalie & Harleen preparing hawks for transfer

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How Much Wood Can a Woodpecker Peck?

By Executive Director, Jennifer Brent

Each year we receive orphaned Acorn Woodpeckers and this year was no exception. Some were brought in after the tree where their nest was located was chopped down and others after falling from their nest, but all were assessed for trauma or illness and a plan for their treatment and diet were developed.

Once able to eat on their own, the woodpeckers were placed in an outdoor aviary to acclimate to the temperature, develop muscle stamina and strength, and de-habituate from humans. In a special aviary, logs were hung from the ceiling to mimic trees. These logs have been drilled with multiple holes, where we secrete mealworms and other tasty tidbits. In this way, the birds learn that pecking the wood will bear food.

Woodpeckers have special adaptations that allow them to “drill” into trees. Their tongues wrap around their brain—this cushions their heads while drilling into wood and provides a handy space for their very long (5 inches for an adult Acorn Woodpecker) tongues to go. These tongues are barbed, which enables them to scoop out insects or sap from a hole.

Male and female Acorn Woodpeckers look virtually the same, both sporting the distinctive red “caps” and black backs and white breasts.

These birds depend on oak forests for survival, as they are specialists in acorns. They may create granaries to prepare for winter and store over 50,000 acorns in a single tree, with each acorn in its own small hole. As specialists, Acorn Woodpeckers are particularly vulnerable to deforestation and loss of habitat.



Acorn Woodpeckers