



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

May 3, 2024

The Unfolding Brown Pelican Event



Brown Pelican rescued from local Malibu beach.



Brown Pelican in care at CWC.



Brown Pelican wanders into a local fire station.

Imagine being surrounded by people, feeling unwell and unable to move. This has been the plight of many Brown Pelicans that have been reported to CWC in the last two weeks. We have received over 80 calls since mid-April reporting lethargic and ill Brown Pelicans spotted along the coast. The calls and sightings have been numerous and concerning. The seabirds are often in the same location for hours prior to be reported and in many cases fly away before CWC is able to rescue them. Additionally, a growing number of those reported are found dead on arrival. Of individuals reported, CWC has been able to rescue and admit 25 Brown Pelicans into care.

Brown Pelicans are a unique water bird, usually spotted by their long bill and pouch used for catching and storing fish. These birds use their strong eyesight and diving skills to spot then plunge into the ocean for fish. They are graceful in flight despite their large size. The pelican is a social bird and is often seen in groups especially when flying, feeding and roosting.

The pelicans being reported are far from the healthy seabirds we admire gracefully gliding along the water. They have been seen wandering aimlessly, seemingly unaffected by human interference and exhibiting mostly indifference. Many have been found in spots that are uncharacteristic for these birds to spend time- the side of the road, near the highway or in crowded public places.

The cause of the increased number of pelican-strandings remains largely unknown. Testing for these occurrences often takes time, and as of now there have been no findings or clear cause. One thing is certain, all the pelicans admitted have been emaciated, their keel bone often protruding. The vast majority have been juvenile pelicans, exhibiting no external injuries.

Two years ago, Los Angeles experienced a similar event, with a large number of distressed Brown Pelicans being reported and admitted to our Intensive Care Unit. At that time, the cause was linked to an unavailability of foraging opportunities. Currently, we cannot say if today's event is linked to similar causes.

The elevated number of sick pelicans is a serious cause for concern and there is much that we do not yet understand. Our efforts are ongoing, and we are committed to keeping the public informed as we learn more about this situation. By working together, we can strive towards better understanding the problem and find a solution to ensure the well-being of these majestic birds. CWC is doing everything possible to respond to calls promptly. If you find one of these birds stranded or injured, please report the animal to CWC at 310-458-9453.