



Wild Times

Summer 2026

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

Through Darkness back to Flight

Dr. Lauren Michaels, Director of Animal Care

As we move into a bustling spring season, our "off-season" felt anything but quiet. In fact, we've seen nearly a 50% increase in patient admissions compared to this time last year. It's a powerful reminder of both the growing challenges wildlife face and the essential role this work plays within a One Health framework, recognizing the link between wildlife health, human health, and our shared environment.

Throughout the year, each patient that comes through our doors carries a story. Some are straightforward. Others, like one of our Great Horned Owl patients, use every tool, skill, and ounce of creativity our team can offer. This case perfectly illustrates both the complexity of our work and the impact of community support.

Admitted in mid-October, an adult owl arrived with multiple health concerns: an eye injury, a wound on their foot, and lameness on that same leg. Despite these concerns, the animal was strong, alert, and somewhat of a challenge to treat. That fighting spirit would ultimately serve this patient well.

Initial examination revealed a chronic foot wound that would require careful management, made more challenging by their impressive ability to remove bandages almost as quickly as we could place them. Despite prompt treatment, their digit was slow to heal. After repeated procedures under general anesthesia to perform wound care, and obtain radiographic imaging, we began to see positive progress.

In addition to their foot wound, this patient had a corneal ulcer in their right eye. Like their foot, this injury was slow to heal. After a couple of weeks with little improvement, we consulted our local veterinary ophthalmologist for a closer look. Together, we pursued advanced treatments to promote healing.

Though we were hopeful, the eye was still not healing as we would have liked. When it became clear that their eye was not recovering, and could compromise their overall health, we chose a different path.

A delicate surgery, called ocular evisceration, was performed by CWC's team to remove the damaged contents of the eye while preserving its outer boney structure. In owls, this technique is superior and less invasive than full eye removal, as it preserves facial symmetry and essential structures to support hearing. Both are important for survival in the wild.

The patient's recovery from surgery was smooth, but another critical question remained: could they still hunt with one functioning eye?

Nocturnal predator patients like this Great Horned Owl need to pass a live prey test to demonstrate their ability to locate and capture food. It was no surprise that with their resilience, they passed the test. *(continued on pg 2.)*

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Dr. Lauren performs the imping operation

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But this owl's journey wasn't over yet.

Time in care had taken a toll on their flight feathers, which are essential not just for flight, but for the near-silent movement owls rely on to hunt. Damaged feathers can mean the difference between survival and starvation in the wild.

Using a centuries-old technique called feather imping, we performed one final procedure. Feather imping involves carefully replacing broken feathers with donor ones, restoring a bird's ability to fly effectively and quietly without waiting for an animal to molt, which can take many months.

Finally, the day came for their last test: flight evaluation. They needed to demonstrate strength, control, and silence in the air. As they lifted off and crossed the flight space with smooth, soundless precision, it was clear they were ready.

This Great Horned Owl's path through rehabilitation was anything but simple. It required advanced medical care, specialized expertise, and weeks of dedicated support from our staff and volunteers. But it also required something we cannot provide- the animal's own determination to survive.



Great Horned Owl patient

Wild Beginnings

By Kristen Kanatzar, Hospital Manager

Wild Beginnings
HELP US SUPPORT
THE YOUNG ANIMALS
IN CARE
MAY 15-27

SCAN THE CODE TO SHOP TODAY

At California Wildlife Center, we care for thousands of injured, orphaned, and sick wild animals each year. Animals are admitted year-round, but there is an influx of patients between March and October, with the majority arriving between March and June. During these months, we take in 30–40 animals daily and respond to over 100 text messages a day, all while balancing the intricate medication and feeding schedules of the animals already in our care.

During our busy season, we see an uptick in all kinds of animals, from the smallest birds to elusive land mammals to marine mammal pups. Our Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) cares for about 80% of our young wild patients, while the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) supports our most medically sensitive young patients, and the Marine Mammal department cares for our ocean-dwelling patients. Together, we provide lifesaving medical care, interval feedings, and sunup-to-sundown attention to the critical patients who depend on us for survival.

While our adult patients require just as much attention, their care is different and often more medically based. Each young patient needs a specialized diet, scheduled feeding intervals, and daily monitoring to ensure they grow healthy, strong, and ready for their return to the wild.

With expertise across more than 100 species, NICU technicians provide carefully scheduled feedings and track each patient's development. It isn't simply feeding, it's knowing each animal as an individual and understanding exactly what they need to survive and thrive. During peak season, the NICU can house up to 300 patients at a time, each with their own needs and personalities.

Our ICU cares for young terrestrial patients with more sensitive needs who are at increased risk of imprinting if not handled correctly. Because these patients are so delicate, we follow strict protocols to ensure they develop properly and remain wild while in care.

Although we receive fewer of these patients, they often stay with us the longest, sometimes up to eight months before they are ready for release.

Our Marine Mammal department rounds out our animal care teams during the busy season. While these patients are much larger than terrestrial babies, they require just as much care and attention, often remaining in care for many months before being cleared for release.

Each season, we care for thousands of wild babies, most arriving between March and June. Together, our team works to provide the best possible care, giving each animal the greatest chance at survival and eventual release. These vulnerable patients rely on us, and we rely on you. Your donations, supplies, and support make this work possible. Please consider supporting our annual Baby Shower through our gift registry.

Rescuing Stranded Marine Mammals during an Outbreak of Avian Influenza

By Heather Henderson, Marine Mammal Program Manager

Each season, the marine mammal department recruits additional team members and holds refresher training sessions to prepare for the busy stranding season. Following a rigid life history, large numbers of recently weaned Northern Elephant Seal pups in distress strand on the Malibu beaches during March, April, and May.

Towards the end of February 2026, devastating news arrived – H5N1 (aka bird flu or avian influenza) was detected in a central California Northern Elephant Seal rookery. With the first pup of the season expected to arrive in early March, the stakes to prepare our team for enhanced response and safety measures increased overnight. Would we be able to continue normal rescue operations? As of May, we are pleased to report – yes!

New "Eyes on the Beach" monitoring along with a streamlined system to communicate animal observations was implemented. Once deemed safe and appropriate to proceed with rescue operations and donning additional PPE, the team brought ailing seals and sea lions into care. New arrivals were placed on a 72-hour quarantine prior to joining the other patients. During this period, daily health assessments were performed, and we closely monitored each elephant seal pup's behavior.

In our small facility, achieving a successful quarantine period required every team member to follow meticulous gear changes and sanitizing steps. As rehabilitators, we are constantly learning, improving, and incorporating new and improved safety techniques.



Northern Elephant Seal pup in care

Since the winter outbreak of avian influenza was detected in California, we have performed 67 marine mammal responses including the rescue of 21 Northern Elephant Seal pups – currently in care. All the hard work and attention to detail by our team paid off. No contagions were introduced into the marine mammal patient population or our rescue personnel. The first Northern Elephant Seal pup [aka Violet] is cleared to return to his ocean home. We are pleased to hear that his kin up at the rookery are no longer displaying signs and symptoms of this challenging virus, so when he heads there to haul out for his annual molt, the environment will be a more welcoming one.

Marine mammal response requires a community of caring and dedicated individuals coming together to be successful. We sincerely thank you for being part of that community and continuing to support our life saving work!

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The Education Corner: Renesting

By Cambria Wells, Education and Outreach Manager

CWC receives over 35,000 calls each year, and many cases end without a rescuer ever entering our facility. A number of these happy stories involve neonate and infant patients, who can often be reunited with a parent by the caring individual who noticed them.

The first step to successful reunification is to stop and observe. We're looking for clues about an animal's age, health, and behavior. Visible wounds or signs of illness mean it is not safe to leave them. If they are bright, alert and active, a parent may still be nearby, even if not visible. All these factors are considered when our team decides whether a reunion is possible.

Renesting, in some cases, is simple. While wildlife may abandon a nest if predators such as people are lingering nearby, the idea that birds will reject babies after human contact is a myth. Fallen baby birds can often be returned to a visible nest or given a replacement. Lost mammals, such as squirrels, can sometimes be placed in a secure spot for their mothers to reclaim. However, extreme weather, deceased siblings, or unsafe nest conditions can be signs that returning a baby is not in their best interest.

Like humans, wild animals are dedicated and attentive parents. We've witnessed thousands of successful reunions, including hummingbirds finding a nest even after it was cut down, owlets nestled into 40-foot-high perches, squirrel mothers carrying their kits to safety, and so much more. If you find a wild animal in distress, such as a lost baby, call us at (310) 458-WILD.