



WildTimes

Fall 2026

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

Fragile Beginnings, Wild Futures

By Dr. Lauren Michaels, Director of Animal Care

As one of the few facilities in Southern California equipped to provide long-term rehabilitation for mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) fawns, California Wildlife Center prepares each spring and summer for the arrival of these fragile patients. This year, our veterinary team has cared for nine fawns among nearly 4,400 other wildlife patients. Although they may appear resilient in the wild, young deer are some of the most medically delicate animals we treat.

Most of the fawns admitted this season arrived after becoming orphaned during the first 2–4 weeks of their life. Without their mothers during this critical stage of development, they can quickly develop life-threatening complications such as dehydration, dangerously low blood sugar, anemia, and disruption of the healthy bacteria that their growing digestive systems depend on. Early intervention can make all the difference. For example, one fawn arrived with critically low blood sugar and severe dehydration detected on their intake exam and bloodwork. Our veterinary team immediately placed an intravenous catheter to deliver fluids and glucose around the clock, carefully monitoring the patient until they were stable enough to continue recovering outside of our intensive care unit.



Young fawn admitted with severe leg wounds

Not every patient arrives simply orphaned, however. This season, most of our fawns presented with traumatic injuries, including wounds or head trauma from vehicle strikes and complications associated with capture myopathy – a potentially fatal condition caused by extreme fear, stress, or exertion. In May, one young fawn was admitted with severe wounds to the lower legs and hooves, making treatment especially challenging. While frequent bandage changes and wound care were necessary, each procedure had to be carefully managed to avoid adding unnecessary stress. Radiographs and bloodwork performed under sedation confirmed there were no fractures or systemic infections, and after nearly two weeks of intensive treatment, the wounds began healing well enough for us to reduce handling and allow the fawn to recover with their newfound herd at CWC.

Treating fawns involves more than just medicine, however. One of our greatest challenges with this species is preventing habituation to people during this early stage of life. Every interaction we make with these patients must balance providing lifesaving care while preserving the animal's natural fear of humans – an essential trait for survival after release. Our specially trained staff use techniques that minimize stress and human exposure whenever possible, giving each fawn the best chance of returning successfully to the wild.

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Watching these vulnerable patients grow stronger and more independent each day is one of the most rewarding parts of wildlife medicine and rehabilitation. Thanks to the dedication of our rehabilitation staff, volunteers, veterinary team, and our community, this year's fawns are on track for release this fall, when they will be old enough to forage independently and return to their rightful place in the wild.

Keeping Our Distance to Keep Them Safe

By Kristen Kanatzar, Hospital Manager



Coyote pups viewed through camera



Bobcat in enclosure taken via enclosure camera



Red-Shouldered Hawk, taken during video monitoring

CWC admits over 4,000 patients a year, and whether our patients are with us for days or months, we always make sure they are receiving the best care possible. While some patients can be assessed through routine visual checks, others are more sensitive and benefit from remote monitoring. Our advanced camera system allows our care team to closely observe these patients while minimizing unnecessary stress and handling.

We utilize trail cameras in our bird of prey enclosures after the patients have recovered from wing or leg fractures to monitor things such as ambulation, flight, perching ability, appetite, and overall well-being. We also set up trail cameras on our patients who have been hit by cars and came in with either soft tissue damage or fractures to see how they walk around and if there are any other points of injury that we need to address.

Cameras are also located in the enclosures of our most sensitive species. Fawns and coyote pups stay in our care for many months until they grow to be releasable young adults. Because of the length of time they are in care, we must find a careful balance between monitoring their growth and well-being while limiting our interaction. This allows them to continue developing herd and pack dynamics, instincts and behaviors they need to survive in the wild.

The most recent addition to our camera lineup is a nanny camera that we put in our smaller indoor enclosures that help us monitor our patients when they are in their most critical condition. The camera provides us with a live feed, which allows us to adjust enclosure or care plans in real time and stabilize patients as quickly as possible. We utilize these when monitoring the appetite of emaciated raptors in care; we can see in real time their ability and willingness to eat and process food.

Many animals act differently when people are observing them. Utilizing a camera system allows us to assess our patients without adding the undo stress of human interaction, which gives us a much better picture of the patient's overall health, well-being, and releasability.

Greatest reward - 100% Northern Elephant Seals Pups Released

By Heather Henderson, Marine Mammal Program Manager

The 2026 northern elephant seal pup stranding season has wrapped up. Due to their life history, we expect to see northern elephant seal pups, or weanlings, in need of rehabilitative care during the spring and early summer months in Malibu. This year, the population experienced its first cases of avian influenza. Northern Elephant Seals continue to recover from the near extinction they faced in the early 1900s. However, that

population decline left the species with a genetic bottleneck, meaning there is less genetic diversity among individuals. A genetic bottleneck occurs when, so few individuals survive to reproduce that the population loses much of its genetic variation. Until new genetic variation develops through natural mutations, a disease that is harmful to some individuals could affect a substantial portion of the population. This makes viral outbreaks, such as avian influenza, especially concerning.

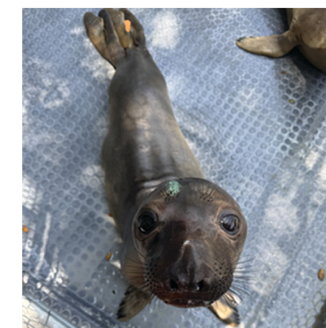
Navigating through a viral outbreak raises added safety concerns for the responders and the seals. To ensure a safe environment for our marine mammal team, and to minimize the potential of disease transmission between patients, additional quarantine and monitoring practices were put into play. The journey was not easy, however I am proud to share that the hard work paid off.

Each pup presented with his/her own unique challenges, yet the most rewarding case was #26-077 (aka Green Silver - for the non-toxic grease marker applied to their fur for identification). This 4.5-month-old pup did not arrive in the poor nutritional condition that most present with. Instead, he arrived carrying a deadly amount of internal parasites, particularly lungworm, causing severe respiratory distress and temporary front limb paralysis. He remained in quarantine for a staggering 22 days with a guarded prognosis. Our team created a specialized treatment plan consisting of: anti-inflammatories, antiparasitics, antibiotics, steroids, pain management medicine, nutritional supplements, and physical therapy. Clear respirations were achieved after 28 days in care and full usage of both front flippers observed on day 40. During his 80 days in care, Green Silver gained 42kg (92.6 lbs) and displayed a spunky and memorable attitude. On release, he set a speed record, galumphing steadily out of the kennel into the ocean immediately after the door opened.

One hundred percent of the northern elephant seal pups rescued in Malibu during the 2026 stranding season were successfully rehabilitated and released back into the Pacific Ocean. Every person played an essential role in that success, from reporting stranded pups on the beach to devoting countless hours to providing specialized care and providing the financial support that made it all possible. Thank you for caring and for continuing to support our mission. We are truly better together!



Patient rescue photo



Patient in care



Patient release

The Education Corner: El Niño

By Cambria Wells, Education & Outreach Manager

This year's "El Niño," the meteorological phenomenon locally associated with high ocean surface temperatures, is predicted to be especially intense for Southern California and beyond. Out in the community, we've been asked: what does this mean for CWC and our patients?

Higher sea surface temperatures: Animals frequently admitted to CWC have already been impacted by ocean temperatures this summer. When warm water at the surface drives prey like fish into deeper, cooler water, animals are forced to migrate or dive more deeply to find prey.

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For some birds and young marine mammals, those may not be feasible options, leading to starvation. Warmer water can also result in harmful algal blooms, resulting in more cases of disease from naturally occurring toxins like Domoic Acid which may be produced by certain algae.

High sea levels and beach erosion: The warmer oceans associated with El Niño result in higher sea levels in the area due to the expansion of water as the temperature rises. Combined with potentially intense winter storms, these conditions can cause beaches to narrow during El Niño years, while flooding can alter the landscape for years to come. In addition to impacts to habitat for local wildlife, changes to the beach affect our access to perform rescues. Our Marine Mammal Rescue Team already faces access challenges when animals in need are located on rocks or behind steep terrain; eroded roadways and beaches could intensify those challenges.

Winter storms: Increased rainfall isn't a guarantee with El Niño, but strong storms for Southern California are a potential effect of the atmospheric changes associated with this phenomenon. In December, January, and February, frequent or intense storms can negatively affect many of our local species, including migratory or early-nesting birds. They can also affect our operations onsite; CWC's location leaves us vulnerable to power, phone, and internet outages. New battery banks funded by donors and grantors in the past year will help us respond to these challenges.

Whatever the forecast may bring, CWC staff are prepared to respond to the needs of the moment. You can help us by reporting animals in distress promptly and donating to support the 40% increase in patients we've already seen in the first six months of this year.