

Karen Telleen-Lawton: A Wonderful Bird

Bad weather and a food shortage have taken a toll on the California brown pelican



The California brown pelican has taken a turn for the worse just a year after being taken off the state and federal endangered species lists. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 03.08.2010

*A wonderful bird is the pelican,
His bill will hold more than his belican,
He can take in his beak
Enough food for a week
But I'm damned if I see how the helican!*
— [Dixon Lanier Merritt](#) (1879-1972)

The California brown pelican, that gawky-looking bird with the remarkable gular pouch, made news last year by graduating from both the state and federal [endangered species lists](#). After DDT poisoning in the 1970s, the birds were on the verge of extinction. Not many species have made it back from the brink so successfully, but their luck took a turn for the worse this year.

As you've no doubt read, hundreds of the pelicans have come ashore since January, in conditions ranging from confused to dead. The big question is, why? Is it natural variation, or some human-caused problem in this still-fragile population?

We all recognize brown pelicans with their striking white-breeding plumage, and the awkward antics of the cocoa-colored juveniles. You may not know what skilled fishers they are: The other side of those dramatic ocean plunges is a 60- to 70-foot underwater dive for prey. The air sacs under their skin cushion the impact and help buoy them back to the surface.

Brown pelicans have a special relationship to Santa Barbara. Browns nest on several of the [Channel Islands](#): [Santa Barbara](#), [Anacapa](#), [Santa Cruz](#) (Scorpion Rock) and (historically) [San Miguel](#). These sites are the only breeding colonies of brown pelicans in the western United States. These are our babies!



In the early weeks of 2010, veterinarians, wildlife rescue groups, the [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#) and [Sea World](#) focused on trying to save distressed birds. Then the [California Department of Fish and Game](#) and other wildlife experts worked to determine the cause. Many of the distressed pelicans were wet when they were picked up, which indicated a problem with their insulating feathers. Consequently, the birds suffered from hypothermia in addition to the mysterious root problem.

To determine the problem, feather samples were sent to various laboratories for analysis. Necropsies on a dozen pelicans showed the birds had been eating unusual prey items, indicative that they weren't finding their normal prey of anchovies and sardines. Occasionally, large numbers of pelicans succumb because of a naturally occurring toxin called domoic acid, but these latest victims do not seem to have those symptoms, and no other animals in the marine ecosystem were affected.

Last week, the organizations reached a consensus about the cause. The combination of a shortage of preferred prey items, coupled with rough winter weather were the primary reasons for the pelican mass-stranding.

“Unfortunately, we are looking primarily at a cyclical event driven largely by weather and oceanographic conditions,” said DFG wildlife veterinarian Melissa Miller in Santa Cruz. “Food shortage coupled with bad weather have taken a toll on the pelicans.”

Meanwhile, don't be tempted to feed that enticing gular pouch. Contact the [Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network](#) in Goleta, or call 805.681.1080 or 805.966.9005. [Click here](#) to make a donation to SBWCN, or [click here for the International Bird Rescue and Research Center](#).

Time will show how the “heltheycan” weather the vicissitudes of nature without the protective perks of endangered listing.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*