

DAILY BREEZE

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Demonic Domoic

Alarming outbreak of acid in the ocean is poisoning hundreds of aquatic birds and mammals. Water samples taken off the coast in recent days are showing the highest plankton cell counts in five years, a USC biology professor said.

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Staff Writer

Beached animals and birds, some paralyzed or having seizures, have become a grim sign of spring along the local shoreline.

But this month's outbreak of toxic poisoning caused by sea algae blooms is alarming scientists and wildlife experts, who say the deadly condition is reaching an exceptionally wide variety of aquatic birds and mammals.

"This is not a new problem -- these (algae) 'blooms' have been going on for a long time," said USC biology professor David Caron, who has been studying the phenomena known as domoic acid.

But water samples taken off the coast in recent days, he said, are showing the highest plankton cell counts in five years.

"This is a big year," he said.

All of that means stepped-up work and crowded conditions at two wildlife rehabilitations centers, the Marine Mammal Care Center and International Bird Rescue Research Center, both in San Pedro.

The algae, which occurs when the wind peels back waves and nutrients on the ocean floor are churned up, has been sickening and killing hundreds of birds, seals, dolphins and otters.

"What we're seeing is the bloom is more severe," said Peter Wallerstein, president of the Whale Rescue Team. "The animals are coming in with more serious conditions right away. Instead of seeing a gradual decline, they're coming in pretty bad."

The poison does its damage by entering the ocean food chain. While there are protections in place to prevent the human food supply from being tainted, there are no such protections for wildlife like sea lions, dolphins and pelicans that consume fish that have eaten the plankton.

Caron, who is conducting a multi-year study of the blooms within a 154-square-mile patch of sea from the Palos Verdes Peninsula to Newport Beach, said much remains unknown about what causes the ocean to fill up with one type of plankton or another in the huge blooms, commonly called red tide.

Contributing factors could be storm runoffs from the Los Angeles River.

Avoid beached animals

Wallerstein said he's picked up 35 sea lions suffering symptoms of domoic acid poisoning just in the last 10 days, including sick animals found on Redondo and Torrance beaches. Residents who find beached animals should stay away because they can inflict severe bite wounds. Call 866-WILD-911.

Species being affected more this year include grebes, gulls, cormorants, American avocets and loons.

"Grebes are dying en masse," said Jay Holcomb, director of the bird center.

And while past years' poisonings affected mostly pregnant sea lions, this year's is hitting males and yearlings across the board, Wallerstein said, adding that the poisoning also is believed to have been a factor in the deaths of two whales in Ventura County.

Animals suffering from domoic acid poisoning often crawl up on shore and bob their heads, appearing disoriented. But Wallerstein said this year he is seeing a wider variety of wildlife already partially paralyzed and immobilized by the poisoning by the time they hit the beach.

"Unfortunately, the rehab centers are so full we're having to do triage on the animals," he said.

Tuna fisheries as far south as Mexico are being affected, as are local bait suppliers, Caron said.

Hermosa Beach Community Services officer Janet Drete showed up at San Pedro's bird center late Thursday with a sick cormorant in a box. The bird was seen lying on The Strand in Hermosa Beach for about 45 minutes, she said.

Likely poisoning case

Veterinarians examining the listless bird said there is a good chance it will prove to be another case of domoic acid poisoning.

This year's toxins also are affecting California brown pelicans, with reports that some of the birds have literally fallen from the sky. About 50 percent of the birds suffering the effects of the poison can be cured and released, Holcomb said.

"I have been doing this work for 35 years and I have never seen anything like this as far as the number of species affected, other than an oil spill," Holcomb said.

'The Birds' inspiration

Pelicans and other sea birds can have seizures while flying and become disoriented, crashing into car windshields. In fact, Caron said authorities believe it was an outbreak of domoic acid poisoning that affected hundreds of birds off Santa Cruz in the 1960s and provided inspiration for Alfred Hitchcock's film "The Birds."

Over the past few days, Caron said, all 20 sampling stations along the coast are reporting concentrations of the plankton not seen in five years.

"It's not clear whether this is a more virulent bloom," he said. "What is clear is we have more algae in the water. ... This is a very large bloom."

Typically, blooms last only about a month, usually appearing in March.

"This year we didn't have a bloom in March," Caron said. "But we're getting a whopper in April."