



Poisoned, 'Drunken' Pelicans Fall From Sky

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By James Longton

A toxic algae bloom along the coast is threatening the endangered brown pelican.

SAN PEDRO - Dozens of California brown pelicans are falling sick, and in many cases dying, from a toxin called domoic acid, born from an unusually large algae bloom.

Since April, nearly 100 birds have been dropped off at the International Bird Rescue Research Center (IBRRC) in San Pedro, half of which were dead upon arrival.

The poisoned pelicans are becoming disoriented, flying inland and dropping aimlessly from the sky. Many have been found meandering on land as though drunk, and in some cases, falling to their deaths. Several accidents have occurred as the intoxicated sea birds fall through car windshields and onto the decks of boats.

"I had my family out on our Catalina 22 for a Sunday cruise, when a pelican fell from the sky and knocked the hat right off my head," said Peter Selner of Costa Mesa.

When conditions are right, the marine phytoplankton psuedo-nitzschia australis blooms. The tiny plankton quickly becomes overgrown and creates what is known as "red tide."

"Since 1998, these toxic algae blooms have been an annual occurrence," said Joe Cordero, wildlife biologist with the National Marine Fishery Service. "As far as what causes the blooms, we really don't know."

As the toxin is passed along the food chain, fish become contaminated with the poison, as do the birds and marine mammals that feed on them.

"We really aren't seeing any mammals coming in with these kinds of symptoms right now," Cordero said. "It appears that this is just impacting the pelicans for right now."

The birds that are quickly rescued have a chance of survival if they receive massive fluid therapy, orally and intravenously, to flush out the toxin from their blood streams. But while this may stave off immediate death, it doesn't mean that the pelicans are cured.

"If the animals have ingested enough toxin, the effects go straight to the brain and really fry the cells," Cordero said. "So, even though they might come ashore and get treated in the rehab center, they could have recurring seizures upon release."

While scientists are at present uncertain of the cause of these algae blooms, we do know that they are now occurring more frequently.

"There's a lot of speculation that it's a result of things like global warming, increased run-off and rising water temperatures," Cordero said. "But there is no proof to link it to any of that right now. All we know for sure is that about once a year, we can expect to have some toxic algae bloom somewhere in California."

In the past couple of weeks, there have been many reports of suspicious behavior among brown pelicans and the rescue centers continue to be inundated. More incidents are likely to occur, as the waters south of Los Angeles Harbor were still testing positive for the poisonous algae as of the writing of this article.