

## **Sick seabirds still inundating local rescuers**

Besides a flood of starving grebes and pelicans, several oil-coated birds are now washing ashore

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Large numbers of starving seabirds continue to wash up on San Luis Obispo County beaches. And, in a new development, a variety of oiled birds are being found.

"This abnormally high influx of seabirds is straining our resources immensely," said Kathy Duncan, vice president of Pacific Wildlife Care, which operates a wildlife hospital in Morro Bay.

In April, the hospital treated 110 starving seabirds, most of them grebes, a small diving seabird. Four starving brown pelicans have also been found, said Dani Nicholson, Pacific Wildlife Care president.

The number of birds in distress varies greatly from year to year. Last summer, animal rescuers were inundated by dozens of starving juvenile brown pelicans.

The birds washing up this year are not sick or poisoned but are emaciated from lack of food. The cause of the starvation is not known, said Mike Harris, state Department of Fish and Game biologist in Morro Bay.

Pacific Wildlife Care is also dealing with a spate of oiled seabirds. The carcass of an oiled sea otter was also recently found.

"We occasionally get an oiled bird now and then, but we've gotten in 15 oiled birds in the past two weeks," Duncan said. "That's abnormally high."

Samples of the oil have been sent to the state's oil spill laboratory in Rancho Cordova to determine the source. Right now, wildlife officials suspect a natural seep, an area where underground oil deposits ooze into the ocean.

"Typically, every spring there's a deposit of tar balls on the beach," Harris said. "We are seeing more this year than typical."

While most of the starving birds are grebes, the oiled birds are of a variety of species.

Nursing a sick or starving seabird is a painstaking process, Duncan said. The bird must be fed liquid food every two hours until it is well enough to eat fish.

They must also be kept in warm pools because sick birds cannot preen to keep themselves waterproof. Preening releases natural oils that help waterproof feathers, and the act also helps interlock the feathers, forming them into a barrier to water. Without such waterproofing, seabirds quickly become hypothermic in the cold ocean water.

Recently Pacific Wildlife Care released into Morro Bay two of the first starving grebes brought into the hospital.