

**Seabirds
starving to
death off
county shores**

A die-off of seabirds, first noticed in Monterey Bay, has now reached the shores of San Luis Obispo County.



Tribune photo by David Middlecamp

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Right: Dave Barrows ties down netting on the new 96-foot-long flight cage that will be used to rehabilitate ailing seabirds. A die-off of seabirds, first noticed in Monterey Bay, has now reached the shores of San Luis Obispo County.

Animal rescuers with Pacific Wildlife Care say dozens of dead or starving seabirds have been picked up on local beaches in recent weeks. Veterinarians' examinations of the dead birds show they were not sick or poisoned but were starving.

"It was really crazy over the weekend," said Dani Nicholson, president of the animal rescue group. "This last weekend, we had four birds on Friday and by Saturday we had 11 with 11 more dead on the beach."

Starting in February, Moss Landing Marine Laboratories reported a "wreck," or die-off, of common murrens, a diving bird abundant along the West Coast. In the first week of March, a survey found 253 dead murrens on Monterey County beaches.

Normally, 15 birds would be found during that period, said Hannah Nevins, who coordinates the lab's beach survey program.

San Luis Obispo County animal rescuers started finding and receiving emaciated or dead murrens in March. Now, several types of grebes are washing ashore. Many are being found at Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.

"They are not getting food," Nicholson said. "We are seeing really skinny birds with empty guts."

One adult Clark's grebe in the Pacific Wildlife Care hospital in Morro Bay is half its normal weight. Most of the starving birds do not survive, Nicholson said.

This is the third year animal rescuers and marine biologists have noticed a die-off of seabirds because of starvation. Last year, animal rescuers were overwhelmed with starving brown pelicans.

Scientists believe the die-off is attributable to changes in the Pacific Ocean that have disrupted the marine food chain. Specifically, they cite disruptions in the California current, which carries cold water down from Alaska, as well as disruptions in the upwelling of nutrient-rich water.

"It's starting to show a pattern," Nicholson said.

Pacific Wildlife Care will soon be better equipped to care for sick and injured birds. The group's triage hospital at the Morro Bay Power Plant will officially open May 1.

In addition to being equipped with warm-and-cool-water pools for the birds to recuperate in, it will have a large seabird aviary. The 96-foot-long structure will have perches at both ends.

It takes two to four weeks to nurse a starving seabird back to health.

"When the bird can fly from one end to the other, they're ready to be let go," Nicholson said.