



## California Brown Pelicans Mutilated in Long Beach Harbor, California

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"Mutilation - To deprive a person or animal of a limb or other essential part. To render imperfect by damaging or excising a part." -  
American Heritage Dictionary



Broken radius and ulna bones in a California Brown Pelican's wing.  
Photograph provided by Karen Benzel, International Bird  
Rescue Research Center, Fairfield, California.

Earthfiles, news category.

**January 18, 2003 Fairfield, California** - Since the 1980s, along the Pacific Coast from Oregon to California, brown pelicans have been found with either their upper beaks cut off or wing bones cut. Holes have also been cut out in some of the birds' food pouches and behind their eyes, without blood. Wildlife experts are puzzled and upset since the California Brown Pelican has been on the Federal Endangered Species list since the 1970s after the pesticide DDT killed off so many of the ocean birds.

The most recent cycle of mutilated birds began around Christmas time and have continued to this week. The International Bird Rescue Research Center in Fairfield, California, has retrieved fourteen of the dead, or dying, birds and sent the bodies to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Law Enforcement Division for necropsies at their Medford, Oregon laboratory. It is hoped that the pathologists can determine specific causes of deaths and other details about how the vicious wounds were made. This week I talked with the Bird Rescue Center's Director, Jay Holcomb.

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### Interview:

**Jay Holcomb, Director, International Bird Rescue Research Center,  
Fairfield, California:**

"We started receiving calls in the week around Christmas time of a number of dead pelicans in the harbor, in the Long Beach Harbor near Cabrillo Beach, which is where the large breakwaters are that the pelicans spend a lot of time roosting and feeding. When our staff at our rehabilitation facility in San Pedro, which is adjacent to Long Beach, went to check it out, they found a number of pelicans had holes in them, that looked to be shot based on just the appearance. Also, these birds had been feeding. They had a lot of fish in their pouches and were healthy birds that had died immediately by whatever these wounds were caused by. So, we picked those up and took them to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife

Service who immediately started an investigation.

In the weeks following, we have managed to find more birds with holes in them and birds with severely crushed wings. I don't mean just broken wings. We do occasionally get birds with broken wings. These are pretty much crushed. These are big healthy birds that are in good condition and then come to shore with a severely injured wing that can only be done to them by someone hurting them.



Dead California Brown Pelican with its wing radius and ulna bones broken in two.  
Photograph provided by Karen Benzel, IBRRC.

#### AND THE BEAKS?

In this situation, none have been cut. They are all fine. It's really the wings and the holes.

#### THE UPPER BEAK WAS CLEANLY CUT OFF IN OREGON LAST YEAR?

Right, Oregon last year, the beaks were cut off. And actually, in the 1980s, there was another incident in California where beaks were also cut off.

#### ON THESE HOLES, HAS ANYBODY RETRIEVED ANY BULLETS?

As far as I know, no bullets have been retrieved. The Fish and Wildlife Service have taken the bodies to their forensic lab in Medford, Oregon. I know they are looking at them, but I don't have any reports.

#### WAS THERE ANY BLOOD AROUND ANY OF THE HOLES?

They were pretty clean. The birds were floating in the water, so it's hard it's washed away by the ocean. However, the broken wings were very blood, of course.

#### IS THERE ANYTHING ABOUT THE PHYSICAL EVIDENCE THAT SUGGESTS HOW THE WINGS WERE CRUSHED?

It's hard to say how they were done, but it's the radius and ulna bones. If you look at your forearm, there are two bones that go down your forearm. The pelicans have the same thing. They hold their wings to their sides. The break on all of them is usually four or five inches wide, so the bones are literally shattered.

What happens with birds is that once they've had an injury like this, they don't just sit there and hold it like we would. They try to fly. They start flapping and in doing that, they rip their muscles and tendons and do even more damage to it.

It was pretty much severely smashed up by the time we got the birds.

IT'S SO BAFFLINGLY EVIL, AWFUL TO ME, THAT WHATEVER COULD PERPETRATE THIS IS BEYOND MY COMPREHENSION.

Yeah, we pretty much feel the same way, too. Why would you hurt an animal that causes humans no harm and is just trying to survive in its world. People who do this are pretty unconscious and cruel and we are hopeful some evidence comes up so we can find whoever did this.

IN OREGON, DID THEY EVER ARREST OR ARRAIGN ANYONE?

My understanding is that they have not found anyone. I would talk to the U. S. Wildlife Service to confirm that, but I haven't heard of anything.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE INTERNATIONAL BIRD RESCUE CENTER, WHAT REASONS DO YOU FIND THAT PEOPLE WOULD HURT BIRDS?

Well, you know, it's interesting. what I've found with my years of working with the public and wildlife rehabilitation is that almost every species of animal to somebody can become a pest. We've seen people in Alaska complain because the eagles are sitting on their building and their droppings were affecting them. You and I would think, "Oh, my God, an eagle on my house would be wonderful!"

But people it's what becomes common in their area. So, in a case like Southern California and the California coast and all the way up to Oregon, Brown Pelicans even though they are still an endangered species have made an incredible come back and there are a lot of them. And when the fish schools are in and the pelicans are feeding, there are literally thousands of pelicans there. Pelicans are really incredible animals and like many, like gulls and other birds, they are very opportunistic. Their whole life is about competing for fish and finding fish and being aggressive about it. That's why they are good hunters and why they are designed to be able to catch fish. What they've learned to do is to figure out that fishing boats, commercial fishing fleets, nets and people sometimes with fishing lines sometimes mean free fish. They don't understand we want the fish and it's not theirs. They think everything is theirs because their minds do not have those limitations. The ocean is just their smorgasbord, so to speak. So, what they do is they start to become a pest to some people. We've actually seen them people sitting on the rocks fishing, pulling in their line, and having a pelican fly in and grab the fish off the line and pull it. People get angry at that.

Actually in Long Beach Harbor where this is happening, we've seen fishing boats come in early in the morning, the commercial fishermen that have been using large nets to get herring and sardines and anchovies out at sea they will come in and the pelicans are swarming their boats trying to get loose fish that are falling through the nets and so on. Literally it is like a cloud of pelicans. Sometimes birds are sitting all over the bait docks just waiting for fish. They will become very aggressive about it.

We know from the past that people have complained about them that they are pests and in the way and they don't want them around. However, we would never assume that responsible fishermen would do anything like this. I know that wouldn't happen, but sometimes I think these animals become such a pest that people get angry with them. We have seen and heard that over the years. That's one way this particular beautiful animal can be an annoyance.

IT'S IRONIC, ISN'T IT, BECAUSE IT WAS IN THE 1970S THAT THE CALIFORNIA BROWN PELICAN WAS DECLARED AN ENDANGERED SPECIES ON THE FEDERAL LIST BECAUSE SO MUCH OF THE BIRDS WERE ELIMINATED BY DDT.

Yeah, it's interesting. They are really sensitive birds. Even though there are a lot of them out there sometimes it looks like they are everywhere. But, they are very

sensitive animals. They are sensitive to problems in our environment. DDT is the best example. Also, oil spills and other instances. Last year in Southern California, we had many pelicans come to our center that were experiencing poisoning from domoic acid which has to do with the algae growth (diatoms of the genus *Pseudonitzschia*) sometimes in warm currents. These animals had central nervous system problems and we treated and released quite a few of them. Many of them died. It hit their population really hard. So, these are things that happen to these animals. And the last thing we need is for these nice, healthy birds to be killed by someone.

AND IN SUCH A HORRIBLE MANNER.

Oh, yeah, it's absolutely ridiculous.

WE SHOULD BE REJOICING THAT THE BROWN PELICAN HAS BEGUN TO FLOURISH AGAIN BECAUSE IN A WAY THEY ARE LIKE A CANARY IN A BIRD CAGE IN A COAL MINE SETTING OFF ALARMS IF THERE IS SOMETHING AMISS IN THE ENVIRONMENT.

That's a beautiful analogy. That's exactly what they are like. Pelicans are known for that they are birds that are called "indicator species." When something is going on with the pelicans, because they are high on the food chain out in the ocean, you know there is something wrong with the environment.

And I think that they are indicating right now there is something wrong with our society if we are actually killing birds, innocent animals, in a horrible way like this."



Healthy California Brown Pelican.  
Photograph provided by Karen Benzel, IBRRC.

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### More Information:

If anyone sees suspicious behavior around birds along the Pacific coast, Jay Holcomb says to call:

- U.S. Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Division: **310-328-1516**

If residents in the Long Beach Harbor area see anything suspicious, or find dead or injured birds,

- International Bird Rescue Research Center's local phone number there is: **310-514-2573**

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### Websites:

<http://www.ibrrc.org/>

#### Credits

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