Research Proves Rehabilitation Works!

Few things are as satisfying as spotting a rehabilitated patient thriving in the wild. Recently, former patient Brown Pelican banded C57 was re-sighted in San Mateo County by prolific pelican spotter Bart Selby 5,000 days after her release. C57 was spotted busily living her pelican life resting and socializing on the coast.

Responding To Avian Botulism Outbreak

Since August, a serious avian botulism outbreak affecting waterbirds has been unfolding in California’s Central Valley. Migrating birds spending time at Tulare Lake have been exposed to this deadly neurotoxin.

Luckily for affected birds, there’s been a plan in place. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has enlisted the Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN) to manage the response. International Bird Rescue has been activated along with other member organizations to assist in this rescue and rehabilitation effort. Hundreds of birds, especially ducks, grebes, stilts, and ibis have come into care. Many have already been released.

Over its 52 years, Bird Rescue has had extensive experience with botulism. Since our beginnings in 1971, Bird Rescue has responded to multiple botulism events at Lake Merritt in Oakland, the Salton Sea (American White Pelicans), Ballona Creek (ducks) in Los Angeles, as well as dozens of other similar outbreaks in urban lakes and ponds throughout California. For this response, our trained staff has joined other wildlife responders to assist in the care of affected birds, and Bird Rescue’s Los Angeles wildlife center is one of the facilities caring for affected animals.

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Patient Highlight: Clinical Experience Sets Our Care Apart

Los Angeles resident Anne Fishbein did not expect to find a Brown Pelican standing alone in a parking lot at the end of her work day, yet here she was. Fishbein stepped in, fearlessly grabbed the pelican, and placed her in the car to transport to Bird Rescue. When wild birds have difficulty finding food, they will risk leaving their natural habitat and attempt to find it elsewhere. Hungry and disoriented, they often wind up in unusual places.

The bird’s lower bill was broken on both sides and bent to the right such that her mouth couldn’t close, leaving her unable to eat. Our Veterinarian, Dr. Rebecca Duerr, wasn’t sure if this complex repair would even be possible, but she enjoys a challenge. The left side was fractured in such a way that it exaggerated the normal curve of the bill. The right side also bent to the right, but this made it into an S-shape, and it was not stable in the up-down (dorsal-ventral) direction. Both sides had semi-stable bony calluses that reinforced the wrongness of the bill shape. Repair would require a re-break.

Dr. Duerr gently applied pressure to the bones until they finally were in good positions, then placed pins to position the bones correctly. Once pins were in, fast curing epoxy secured everything in place. This bird needed the most hardware Duerr has ever used in a pelican’s face to hold the bill stable while it healed. After 66 days in care, this formerly broken pelican was released on July 13, 2023. Fishbein, the pelican’s rescuer, had the opportunity to set her free.

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Since then, more than 1,750 of our former pelican patients have been released with these bands which allows the birds to be easily spotted in the wild.

Bird Rescue’s work caring for injured birds helps mitigate the human impact on wild birds. Every single one of our former patients that wear a blue leg band survived a life-threatening event to arrive into our care in the first place before making it through to be released. Each re-sighting demonstrates that the care we provided was effective at getting the birds over their problems and fit to survive after release.

Information about how rehabilitated wild animals do after release is quite sparse in the scientific literature; to expand knowledge on this subject, Bird Rescue’s veterinarian, Dr. Rebecca Duerr recently published a scientific paper that explores not only our former patients’ post-release survival but correlates it to what their medical problems were while they were in care.
GOWRS – Working Together Globally For Oiled Wildlife

Bird Rescue’s CEO JD Bergeron and Response and Training Manager Michelle Bellizzi attended the second biannual in-person meeting of Global Oiled Wildlife Response System (GOWRS) September 24-29. GOWRS is a consortium of 10 of the world’s most experienced oiled wildlife response organizations who are working together to promote professional oiled wildlife response throughout the world. Bird Rescue is one of the original members.

During this week-long meeting, GOWRS member organizations elected a new Chair-Elect, and Aiuká’s Director Valeria Ruoppolo replaced Oiled Wildlife Care Network’s Director Mike Ziccardi as Chair. A Limited Liability company (GOWRS Ltd.) is nearly complete and will be based in Gibraltar. Bergeron will serve as Director representing Bird Rescue.

Part of this meeting included several concurrent drills and tests of products of workgroups, including a test of the MultiBel emergency alert and reporting system as well as testing of a tool to identify and assess future Assessment Team members. We also participated in a Shell Co. drill in the UK, where GOWRS convened a Strategic Team Meeting, identified an assessment team, and participated in drill operations. Finally, GOWRS conducted a full-deployment field assessment of a worst-case scenario spill in Padilla Bay, WA (a spill caused by a tsunami during breeding or migration is truly mind-boggling to consider). This was a great opportunity to get to know the areas in which our GOWRS partners work, network with other GOWRS members, and try out new Go-Kits that were distributed to each member org for use by future deployed Assessment Team Members.

This successful meeting wound up with a fantastic whale-watching trip with Blue Kingdom Whale and Wildlife tours, and were rewarded with spotting humpback whales, sea lions, harbor seals, porpoises, and of course seabirds.

Help Keep Birds Safe: Check Before Trimming

The months of September through February are the best time to complete your tree and shrub maintenance as most birds will have completed their breeding cycles by this time.

✦ Always check before you trim! Be sure to examine the area carefully to make sure there are no active nests or roosts. Check the ground for evidence of bird droppings which can indicate an active nest or preferred perch.

✦ Lights out during migratory season! Turn off or dim non-essential lighting during critical migration periods. Turning off lights dramatically reduces hazards, allowing birds to safely proceed with their migratory journeys.
Preparation is key when responding to wildlife emergencies. Responsible wildlife management begins with having a plan and requires regular training and drills year-round. This map shows a snapshot of where our work has taken us in recent months.

✦ Bird Rescue participated in a Worst Case Disaster Tabletop Exercise with client Clean Rivers Cooperative and their partner Marine Fire and Safety Association-MFSA on September 20 and 21 in Vancouver, WA. Bird Rescue’s Director of Operations Julie Skoglund gave a training and participated in the exercise the following day.

✦ USINDOPACOM: Hosted by PCCI and Navy Supervisor of Salvage in Honolulu, HI for colleagues working in the oil spill response field from Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Bird Rescue's Senior Director of Response Services Barbara Callahan gave a presentation on oiled wildlife response tactics for the group on September 18.

✦ Mutual Aid Drill (MAD) in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska on September 20. Bird Rescue’s Response and Training Manager, Michelle Bellizzi, participated in the this year’s annual MAD Drill was hosted by Glacier Oil and Alaska Clean Seas.

✦ Both Barbara Callahan and Julie Skoglund from presented at the annual Oiled Wildlife - First Response Training in Kodiak, Alaska on October 7 for Alyeska Pipeline Service Company, with whom we’ve had a response contract since 1977.

✦ Bird Rescue hosted a booth at the Clean Gulf Conference in San Antonio, TX on November 7-9. Michelle Bellizzi will also be presenting a paper and Barbara Callahan will be presenting as part of a pre-conference workshop “Response Basics”.