

## Brown Pelicans Maimed

A Visit with the Victims and their Veterinarian

by Charlene Beane Norco, California

In mid-October, California brown pelicans whose top beaks had been chopped off received national media coverage. Such an act, had it happened to any living creature, would have been hideous, but the gravity of the crime was compounded because the California brown pelican is an endangered species.

On October 30, Jean Hessler, Watchbird art director, and I visited the Crown Valley Animal Hospital in Laguna Niguel, California to see the mutilated birds. As we arrived, a Fish and Game officer was leaving—he had just brought in another pelican whose beak had been severed.

Dr. Gayle Roberts took us back to the pelican pen. Although I thought I was mentally prepared for what I was about to see, the sight of the injured birds, coupled with the overwhelming smell of fish, almost made me faint.

After the initial shock, I regained my composure and started seeing the good things. Except for their stubs of top beaks which ranged from one to four inches in length, the birds were in excellent condition. They are housed in a large area with vinyl coated concrete floor, tile walls, and a temporary ceiling of poultry netting to keep the birds from flying into the adjacent dog runs. As amenities, the pelicans have a child's



Dr. Gayle Roberts holds a recently severed pelican's beak. It may serve as a model to mold a replacement.

wading pool, several tires to climb on and a large window with iron grillwork where they perch to admire their admirers. The pen also contains a fake fire hydrant, a reminder of the intended purpose of the space.

California brown pelicans are a little smaller than the Canada goose, 7-9 lbs. Their necks are longer, more like swans, and their heads are large like geese and swans, but rounder, more domed, in appearance. The top back of the neck carries about a six-inch row of tufting that becomes yellowish in adults, possibly due to sun bleaching.

Although they lack the dramatic



Immediate first aid for a new arrival. With a little holding help from author and hospital staff member, Dr. Roberts extracts an imbedded fish hook.

Photos by M. Jean Hess

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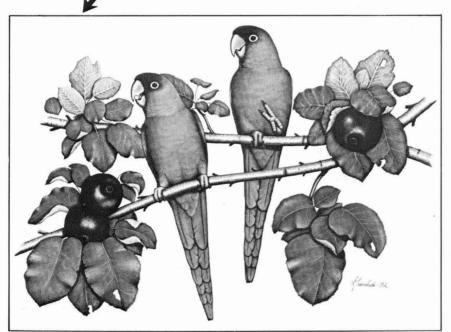
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markings of the Canada goose, the color tones are similar. These injured birds are young, probably last spring's chicks, because their heads are dark, velvety, chocolate brown. Only one is showing a lightening of head feathers. This bird is probably older than the others. Dr. Roberts said that this bird had trouble adapting to handling and hand feeding. Now that the pelicans are accustomed to humans, the bird that appears to be the oldest is the most aggressive. As the birds stabbed at me with their lower beaks, begging for food, this bird with the lighter face made the most vigorous thrusts. The younger birds were curious and gentle with their probes; the older bird wanted to be fed and he meant it!

Back and wing feathers are dark to medium brown, variegated but not patterned. The breasts are a soft beige, and the color tones are blended, not delineated.

The feather texture is harder and rougher than that of a goose, and the feathers are not quite as smooth lying, but this may be partially due to these birds' inability to groom themselves. It was pitiable watching them reach back to their oil gland with their single lower beaks, making grooming gestures, rubbing their heads on their feathers. Since they cannot groom properly, these birds may have to wait through an entire moult to be sea-worthy; without the proper distribution of natural oil, the feathers will absorb water and the birds would sink and drown.

The legs and feet are slate colored and medium in size. I was surprised to notice that their fourth (hind) toe is the same length as the others and that it is also webbed, in contrast to domestic waterfowl which have three long toes and two webs with a short fourth toe that is used for balance. My geese want their feet on terra firma; they seem afraid to walk up steps or ramps. The pelicans, with their four long toes and three webs, were climbing all over the place. They seem to have much greater ability to grip and perch than the more earthbound domestic waterfowl. No doubt that third inside web in their feet gives them extra power when they are swimming.

The pelicans have about a seven foot wingspan, and they are fortunate to be in large enough quarters that they can spread and flap their wings. The force of those wings was formidable when they smacked me in the face.

Pelican eyes are larger than a dime, more than twice the size of goose eyes, and dark, liquid brown. The expression in those eyes is so innocent and trusting, it is hard not to wax anthropomorphic.

Photos by Frank S. Todd

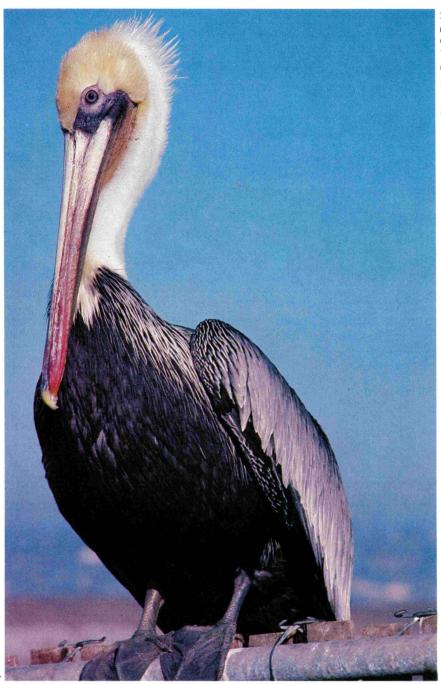
The pelicans are eating well. Local fishermen are donating part of their catches each day—mostly bonito—to feed the birds. The fish is cut into bitesize pieces and dropped into the elastic lower beaks. A man from Canada sent 100 lbs. of frozen mackerel which the pelicans relish because it can be eaten whole. The mackerel is being rationed to use as treats and to tempt reluctant diners and newly rescued patients to eat. The pelicans at the hospital when I visited consume 40-50 lbs. of fish per day. They also get vitamins. In the wild it is thought that they favor anchovies.

Their weight and condition was good. Dr. Roberts said that they were not emaciated when they were brought in. She speculated that fishermen had been throwing them fish. She thinks most of the injured pelicans had not learned to fish on their own, and this dependence contributed to their vulnerability.

The beaks were cut off with a serrated tool, perhaps something like a fish knife. Some of the beaks were cut off entirely; others, especially those cut closer to the nostrils where the beak is thicker, were still attached at the lower edges, but were severed to the point that they flapping and useless. A few were cut through into the edges of the lower beak. These wounds have already started to heal and gain strength.

I asked Dr. Roberts if the upper beaks which had not been completely amputated could have been secured and allowed to heal, analogous to human arms and fingers that have been reattached.

Undamaged birds in the wild— California brown pelican in adult plumage, right. A graceful flyer when air borne, an entertainer when diving for fish. Since their comeback in the last few years, they are often seen around jetties and piers. Juvenile below.



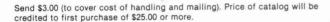


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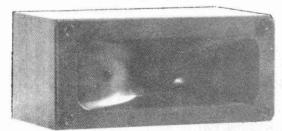
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Dr. Roberts explained that this procedure was out of the question because when the injured pelicans were brought in, the edges of the wounds had already started to die.

She showed us the skull of a pelican loaned to her by a Los Angeles sculptor. The cranium and the beak are a single long bone that extends to the tip of the beak. The beak of a live pelican is covered with a thin layer of keratin. The bone of the pelican beak is porous, almost spongy in texture. The myriad air pockets within the bone structure reduce weight and absorb some of the impact of power dives.

Dr. Roberts had to complete the removal of the top beak of the pelican that was brought in just before we arrived. She could not do it with a scalpel; she had to use a bone cutter.

The pelicans did not bleed to death or die of infection because the salt water cauterized and sterilized their wounds. The wounds are covered with a crusty, vellowish scab.

I examined the amputated upper beak. The edge that had been cut had started to die and the marrow had begun to recede. Dr. Roberts believes that had reattachment been attempted, gangrene might have set in or the beaks might have been rejected because the injuries were simply too old to heal.

The effect of the salt water makes it impossible to speculate as to the exact date of the mutilation. Cage cards indicate that the first birds were brought in on October 16, but all of the birds appear to be in about the same condition. It is unclear whether the crimes were committed all in one day or if they were committed over a series of days.

The first artificial beak was attached to a bird aptly named Pinocchio on Sunday, October 24. A team of three veterinarians and two technicians worked for more than three hours to attach the prosthesis with bone cement, metal pins and plates. Pinocchio was groggy, but ate some fish on the following day, and by Tuesday he was experimenting with using his new beak. On the following Saturday when I visited, he gave my hand a respectable chomp.

Surgeries for the remaining birds are being scheduled in order of length of remaining beak. Veterinarians hope that they will learn as they go so that by the time they get to the birds with the shortest existing beaks they will know what to do.

A beak of a dead pelican was used as a mold for the prostheses. The upper beak is a complex design of ridges and grooves; the bean (the knob at the tip of the beak) is pronounced-round at the top and southern California

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pointed at the bottom. The lower beak is like a slender jawbone suspending the elastic pouch that expands to hold the fish before they are swallowed.

At this time, replacement beaks are being researched and hand-crafted by Marlin Fiberglass of Huntington Beach, California. The amputated beaks weigh approximately 38 grams; the artificial beak attached to Pinocchio weighs about 60 grams. After it was shaped and cosmetically colored to match a natural beak as closely as possible, it was drilled hollow to reduce the weight, but during surgery, the core was filled with bone glue to secure the metal pins. Researchers are still looking for lighter weight materials to use in fabricating beaks for birds scheduled for future surgery.

Stress tests are being done to evaluate how much punishment the artificial beaks can tolerate, and there is on-going discussion about the pros and cons of rigid beaks vs. somewhat flexible beaks.

The future of the mutilated pelicans cannot yet be determined. Much will depend on their ability to adapt to the new beaks. If all of the criminals who did this hideous act can be captured and jailed, Dr. Roberts favors rehabilitating the pelicans and returning them to the wild.

If, in the opinion of the experts, the pelicans' ability to live normal lives seems questionable, they may become a captive breeding colony at one of the nearby wild animal facilities such as Lion Country Safari, Sea World, San Diego Wild Animal Park or San Diego Zoo. These places have professional staff to supervise the ongoing care of the pelicans and could provide support if, for instance, the replacement beaks were too awkward for them to feed their young properly.

Another concern is that the pelicans have become so tame during their hospitalization and with their dependence on hand feeding that they may have lost their fear of man enough to jeopardize their own safety if they are released.

Many people have rallied with information and donations of material and money. A sixth grade class from Huntington Beach, California held a bake sale and raised \$250 to donate to the cause.

Dr. Roberts' stack of fan mail would make a movie star envious. At the time of my visit the reward for information leading to the capture of the criminals had reached \$13,000 and was rising. Other money donated on behalf of the injured pelicans is being held in a fund for future determination. Since most of the medical care and other necessities have been donated, Dr. Roberts hopes that the donations can be used to build a laboratory and rehabilitation center for sea birds next to



Young mutilated pelicans confer with the author. A request for fish seemed to be the topic.

the existing hospital.

Because of its proximity to the beach and the willingness of the doctors to treat injured wildlife, the hospital receives hurt or helpless sea birds on an almost daily basis. During our interview, a very young pelican was brought in. Its beak was intact, but it had a fishing sinker connector with a string of monofilament line attached embedded in its wing web. Oil soaked birds are regular patients. Two pelicans that for some reason cannot fly were resting in a dog run. As birds recuperate, they are transported to Lion Country Safari where they are cared for until they are strong enough to fly and resume their normal lives.

During the writing of this story, more maimed pelicans have been rescued; information about the pelicans changes on a daily basis, and the total pelican story will change many more times before this article actually gets into print. At this time, questions far outnumber answers.

More beak implants will be done. They will either succeed or fail. The criminals may or may not be captured. If they are, it is doubtful that the law is equipped to justly punish such a crime.

Whatever the outcome for these specific pelicans, important learning is taking place. Public awareness about the need for protection of endangered species has been heightened by this atrocity. The



Dr. Gayle Roberts with her model patient, Pinocchio, the first bird to be fitted with a replace ment upper beak.

medical community has been forced to explore innovative surgical techniques and experiment with new materials. The public and scientists from varied disciplines have shared pieces of information that have combined to assist this project. The learning that has taken place has broad implications in its potential to help other species.

Pinocchio was left with a longer stub of his natural beak than some of the other birds, pins visible at joint area. For the birds with shorter stubs, more difficulties are anticipated.

This story does not pretend to be complete. It is, rather, the report of an afternoon with nine victims of inexplicable violence and a partially audible interview with a courageous veterinarian. Hopefully, Watchbird can publish an article in about six months that will tell the ending of this story.

In an effort to give credit where credit is due, although it would be impossible to name all of the people who have aided this project, major contributors have been:

California Fish & Game Department the people who have rescued the pelicans and bring them their daily ration of fish;

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service—the agency responsible for investigating the crime;

Dr. Robert Rooks, Veterinary Surgical Referral Service, Fountain Valley, California—the surgeon who developed the surgical technique to repair the pelicans, along with Dr. Rick Woerpel.

Dr. John Hamil, Canyon Animal Hospital, Laguna Beach, California—assistant surgeon.

Dr. Rick Woerpel, Animal Medical Center of Lawndale, Hawthorne, California-anesthetist.

The staff at Crown Valley Animal Hospital—Dayna Brooks, Lisa James, Jeff Lohre and Stacie Sherman—is responsible for keeping the pelicans alive and well on a daily basis. It is no small task to feed and clean up after a room full of hungry young pelicans. They are to be commended for the excellent condition of these birds.

Correspondence regarding the pelicans and donations can be addressed to Gayle R. Roberts, D.V.M., Crown Valley Animal Hospital, 28892 Crown Valley Parkway, Laguna Niguel, CA 92677. •



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