

# Pelican disease strikes again

## Bird's Eye View

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Director Exotic & Wild Bird Center

A dangerous epidemic is affecting Brown Pelicans this season. Keys residents can help by immediately reporting any disabled Brown Pelican they might spot to the Exotic and Wild Bird Rescue Center at 872-1982. When you call, a volunteer will be dispatched to rescue the bird. All you have to do is call immediately even if you're not sure that the

bird is still alive. So far in December, the Rescue Service has located disabled Pelicans at Truman Navy Base (Key West), Little Palm Island, Sunshine Key, and Cudjoe Key.

The Pelican disease is avian botulism caused by bacteria named *Clostridium botulinum*-- if that sounds a little familiar it is because the facial treatment, Botox, is made from *Clostridium* bacteria. Avian botulism causes progressive paralysis in Pelicans, which prevents them from flying and eating. The visible stages of paralysis are: inability to fly, called "standing bird"; followed by "belly bird", when it cannot stand but can hold its head up; then "pancake" when it just lies flat; and finally, death. Other symptoms are bruises under the wings, limp or limber neck, and eyelids swollen with the third eyelid shut down like a curtain.



**An adult brown pelican on the day of rescue with complete paralysis, bruises under the wing, limber neck symptom, both eye lids swollen and the third eyelid shut down like a curtain.**

Botulism can wipe out whole flocks of birds.

The victims of this disease can be cured if they are rescued early enough. The Rescue Center starts treatment by administering subcutaneous fluids, using oral flushing to get toxins out of the system, and applying eye ointment. Then the victim is given a special avian botulism vaccine, supplied by the Botulism

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Laboratory in Pennsylvania. If rescue and treatment start at an early stage, the Pelicans can recover completely. There is no danger to human beings from the avian botulism--this toxin does not affect humans.

Pelicans at the Rescue Center show the whole range of symptoms. The "pancakes" lay helplessly in small pens, weakly moving their wings with the long bills lying awkwardly on the floor of the cage. Volunteers must tube-feed oral fluids to the birds, flush the toxins through their systems and clean them up round-the-clock.

A surprising number of these birds do recover. You might never think it possible to look at them when they come in. When healthy, they become fairly aggressive and snap their beaks at workers. We set most of the pelicans free as soon as they recover.

Although Brown Pelicans aren't the only birds affected, they are among the first species to sicken. Caught early enough, the endangered Pelicans and other rescued birds have a high recovery rate with round-the-clock care by Center volunteers who help feed the birds and flush the toxin through their systems. Volunteers with boats are also needed to help retrieve sick birds.

Anyone willing to help at sea, onshore, or at the Center on Big Pine, please e-mail Exotic and Wild Bird Rescue at [chicco54@bellsouth.net](mailto:chicco54@bellsouth.net) or call at (305) 872-1982.