Sea and Shore Birds: Coexisting with Wildlife

Because we live near the ocean, there are more than 50 species of sea and shore birds in the San Diego region. The number of species varies greatly during the seasons because many migrate through the area during fall, spring and winter months, using our shores for food to sustain these migrations. Some species spend their entire life at sea. Project Wildlife helps about 800 of these birds every year, 40% of which are Western Gulls.

Many seabird calls come to Project Wildlife just after winter storms and big surf where these migrating birds are blown off course and are found on land, even away from the ocean. Some calls are about bird species that cannot take off from the ground because they need water or a cliff to take off from.

If a gull is on the ground and cannot fly: If it is late spring and summer, it may be a fledgling Western Gull that has left it's nesting area on a nearby roof. If it looks healthy, the parents are present and it is in a safe place, leave it alone and observe.

If it is tangled in fishing line. The bird will need the help of experts at Project Wildlife to remove it. If the animal has swallowed a hook, do not cut it off. It prevents the rehabber from being able to see the line.

Fishing Line, Hooks, and Birds

Birds such as cormorants, herons, egrets, loon, grebes and gulls can inflict serious injuries with their beaks and should be handled cautiously. Always wear protective eyewear, use a thick towel or blanket and ALWAYS hold the bird with the head facing away from you. Call SDHS Dispatch or animal control (in unincorporated areas) if you do not feel safe capturing the bird.

What to do if you find:

If you've found an injured animal and need information on where to take it, please call: (619) 299-7012

Safety Issues and Handling

Cormorants, herons, egrets, loon, grebes and gulls can inflict serious injuries with their beaks. These species defend themselves by stabbing or biting with their beaks and aim at your face and eyes.

Always use gloves or a thick towel or blanket when attempting to capture or handle an injured or sick water bird. Even small egrets and herons have stiletto-like beaks.

• Throw the towel or blanket over the bird’s head and body and hold the bird across the shoulders and body
restraining the wings with your hands.

• ALWAYS hold the bird so the head is facing away from you.
• Enlist help from a rescue organization if the bird is aggressive and strong.

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**Seabirds or Wading Birds with No Obvious Sign of Injury**

Birds come ashore more frequently after storms, bad weather or big surf. They may have internal injuries or hidden fractures.

• Do not return them to the water.
• Do not put them in a tub of water.

They have come out of the water because they do not feel well. Birds can get caught in high surf and have sand and water forced into their mouths, nostrils and feathers. They may be sick and thin from a long migration. Birds may also be found in urban areas after collisions with buildings or traffic. Ducks at local lakes and ponds as well as sea ducks such as scoters and mergansers may have swallowed lead shot or sinkers and be suffering from lead poisoning.

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**Temporary Housing**

• Place them in a cardboard box with newspaper on the bottom covered with a thick towel.
• Birds that cannot stand should have a foam pad, pillow or crumpled newspaper under the towel to provide a cushioning effect.
• Keep warm (70-80 degrees F), dark (cover box with thin sheet or loosely closed flaps) and as quiet as possible.
• If the bird starts open-mouthed breathing it may be too hot. Reduce heat if this occurs.

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**Fish Line or Fish Hook Injuries**

• Birds with fish line or fish hook damage should be checked by a rehabilitator, even if the hook or line has been removed by someone at the scene.
• If the line goes down the throat, don’t cut it all off, it may be the only clue to the rehabilitator that a hook is further down. Leave a minimum of 12 inches of line attached to any hook, or trailing from the bird’s mouth.
• Do not tug on the line. Use tape to attach the line to the bird so that line is not swallowed and further entanglement does not occur. Hooks are rarely life threatening, but the line can be very damaging by its tourniquet effect on limbs and body.
• Line tangled around legs, wings or neck should be untangled and removed or cut through and removed. If the line is embedded, leave it alone for a vet or rehabber to remove.

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**Sick or Dying Birds**

• If you see numerous sick, dying or dead seabirds or other wild birds in one location such as on a beach or in a park, contact a wildlife rehabilitator or your local department of Fish and Game or US Fish and Wildlife Service.
Food & Water

- Do not try to give water to sea or shore birds with the exception of gulls and mallard ducks. Gulls and mallard ducks may have a sturdy bowl of water if they are standing and can hold their head up.
- Do not try to feed sick or injured birds.