

CROW Case Of The Week:

Brown Pelican



by Patricia Molloy

One of the reasons that Southwest Florida is so special is the variety of beautiful seabirds that frequent our coasts. One of the most spectacular is the brown pelican (*Pelecanus occi-*

dentalis). To watch these graceful flyers skim across the surface of the ocean and deftly dive into the waters for food is awe-inspiring. While rather clumsy on land, the brown pelican is an expert plunge diver thanks to superior eyesight; it can spot fish in the water from heights of 50 to 60 feet. The large pouch of skin suspended from its long gray bill can hold up to three times more than its stomach – nearly three gallons of fish and water.

Brown pelicans are one of the largest seabirds in the U.S., however, they are the smallest members of the seven pelican species worldwide. Adult males and females are similar in appearance and size, weighing approximately eight pounds (3.6 kg) with a four foot long body and a wingspan of seven feet (2.1 m). They are also long-lived birds: according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, one pelican captured in Florida had been



The brown pelican recuperating with a double crested cormorant in CROW's pelican complex. The enclosure allows birds to stretch their wings and exercise their chest muscles

banded 31 years earlier!

On December 3, an adult brown pelican was found on Sanibel near power lines. The bird was unable to stand, flap his wings or even blink his eyes. No other history was available. Upon his arrival at CROW, it was discovered that the pelican was suffering from toxicosis, an all too common diagnosis caused by the ingestion of the algal bloom responsible for red tide.

During his initial critical state, the pelican was tube fed Piscivore Care, a formula specifically designed for fish-eating seabirds. After a couple of days, the Piscivore was increased from twice a day to three times per day, as it is common for high-stressed wild birds to lose weight due to increased contact with humans. The pelican also received fluid injections under his skin to keep him hydrated and, like all toxicosis patients, he was given a

liver detox with milk thistle to stimulate his liver into filtering out the toxins.

As pelicans are seabirds, CROW's staff ensured that he had daily "tub time." In addition to being good physical therapy, it allows them to monitor his strength and stamina at a safe distance without causing undue stress to the bird. On his third visit to the tub, the staff noticed that he was attempting to stand but still resting on his hocks (the region of the leg between the joint and the webbed feet). After a few more visits, he was able to stand for short periods of time.

After approximately 10 days, he began eating fish on his own and his tube feeding regiment was decreased. Once his appetite resumed to normal levels, he was moved to the pelican complex where he able to exercise and socialize with other seabirds, including a rare American white pelican.

Once he was strong enough to survive in the wild, CROW staffers began preparations for his release. On December 23, the brown pelican happily took flight on Algiers Beach, Sanibel.

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a non-profit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to P.O. Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Call 472-3644 or visit www.crowclinic.org.

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