

# Malady fells seabird flocks

## Veterinarians suspect similarity to turtle ailment

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**MARATHON** — Hundreds of brown pelicans and great white herons in the Florida Keys are sick, and in some cases dying, from a mysterious illness that has wildlife experts scratching their heads as they scramble to save the seabirds.

In the last six months, flocks of pelicans and herons have been found either dead or critically ill throughout the islands and in the neighboring Marquesas Keys.

Veterinarians say the seabirds' symptoms are strikingly similar to those afflicting loggerhead turtles in the Keys, but they haven't been able to scientifically link the two die-offs.

All of the rescued seabirds cannot open their mouths to eat or blink their small, round eyes.

A few have mustered enough energy to walk, except they use their wings as feet.

But most of the pelicans and herons lie motionless in their cages, too weak to lift their feathered heads.

"Some of them are so sick, you can't tell if they're dead or alive," said Kelly Grinter, director of Marathon Wild Bird Rescue, where some 40 seabirds have been brought with the unknown illness.

"Whatever is hitting them, it's hitting them fast. We're finding dead pelicans that have literally nose-dived out of mangrove trees without opening their wings."

Only five of the 35 sick loggerheads rescued have survived thus far, but Grinter says the majority of pelicans and herons are recovering — about 75 percent at the Marathon

facility — with extensive fluid therapy.

Wildlife rescue centers in Key West and Tavernier also have been successful in rehabilitating the seabirds.

Theories abound as to what may be causing the epidemic, which surfaced in the Lower Keys and has affected only brown pelicans, great white herons and loggerhead turtles.

Some suspect a natural or man-made toxin, possibly in jellyfish, that has subsequently damaged the creatures' central nervous systems.

Although pelicans and herons mainly eat fish, while sea turtles feed on crustaceans and squid, wildlife authorities contend an algae bloom might have infected both creatures' food supplies and subsequently caused a life-threatening toxicity.



LISA FUSS/HERALD STAFF

**UNKNOWN ILLNESS:** Kelly Grinter, director of Marathon Wild Bird Rescue, cares for a great white heron that cannot blink its eyes or lift its head.