



Alfred Hitchcock

Phoned Sentinel for story

'The Birds' came to Capitola

By **DAN WHITE**

Sentinel staff writer

CAPITOLA — The toxin that brought death and dementia to hundreds of local birds four years ago may also have caused the 1961 seabird invasion of Capitola — the infamous case that inspired Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds."

In August of 1961, crazed sooty shearwaters rained down on the Central Coast, crashing into homes from Pleasure Point to Rio del Mar. In early morning the gull-like birds came out of the fog and darkness, shattered windows, pecked people, and smashed into car headlamps.

Everyone had a theory for the birds' strange behavior. Some even speculated the birds had eaten too much fish and were "floundering" in the air.

"At the time they couldn't find any cause," said David Garrison of UC Santa Cruz's Institute of Marine Sciences. "It was dismissed as birds being lost in the fog and flying toward lights but it could very well have been domoic acid."

ing lost in the fog and flying toward lights but it could very well have been domoic acid."

Thirty years after the famous bird attack, scientists discovered the presence of domoic acid in the Monterey Bay. This toxin could have been in local waters long before researchers knew about it, said Garrison.

Hitchcock's 1962 movie was largely based on a 1950s' Daphne DuMaurier book, "The Birds" about millions of birds invading a small town.

But the Capitola bird invasion had all the elements of a made-to-order horror film. Cars crushed the bodies of dying birds lying on the street. Birds vomited up bits of fish and fish skeletons over house tops and lawns, leaving an overpowering stench.

"Startled by the invasion, residents rushed out on their lawn with flashlights, then rushed back inside as the birds flew toward their light," read an Aug. 18, 1961 Sentinel account.

Hitchcock, who owned a home in the hills near Scotts Valley at the time, phoned the Sentinel from Hollywood requesting a copy of the front-page bird article.

Hitchcock even asked the staff if he could use the clipping as "research material," according to a newspaper account.

Some of the similarities between the 1961 and 1991 events are chilling.

According to 1961 newspaper reports, the birds had just finished dining on anchovies, which were also the domoic acid-containing food source that killed hundreds of Monterey Bay brown pelicans and cormorants 30 years later.

In 1961, dead and stunned seabirds filled the streets and roads. People observed birds acting helpless on land, attempting to take off and making a thudding "wheels up" landing. Birds wailed, "Cried like babies" and floundered around on the ground.