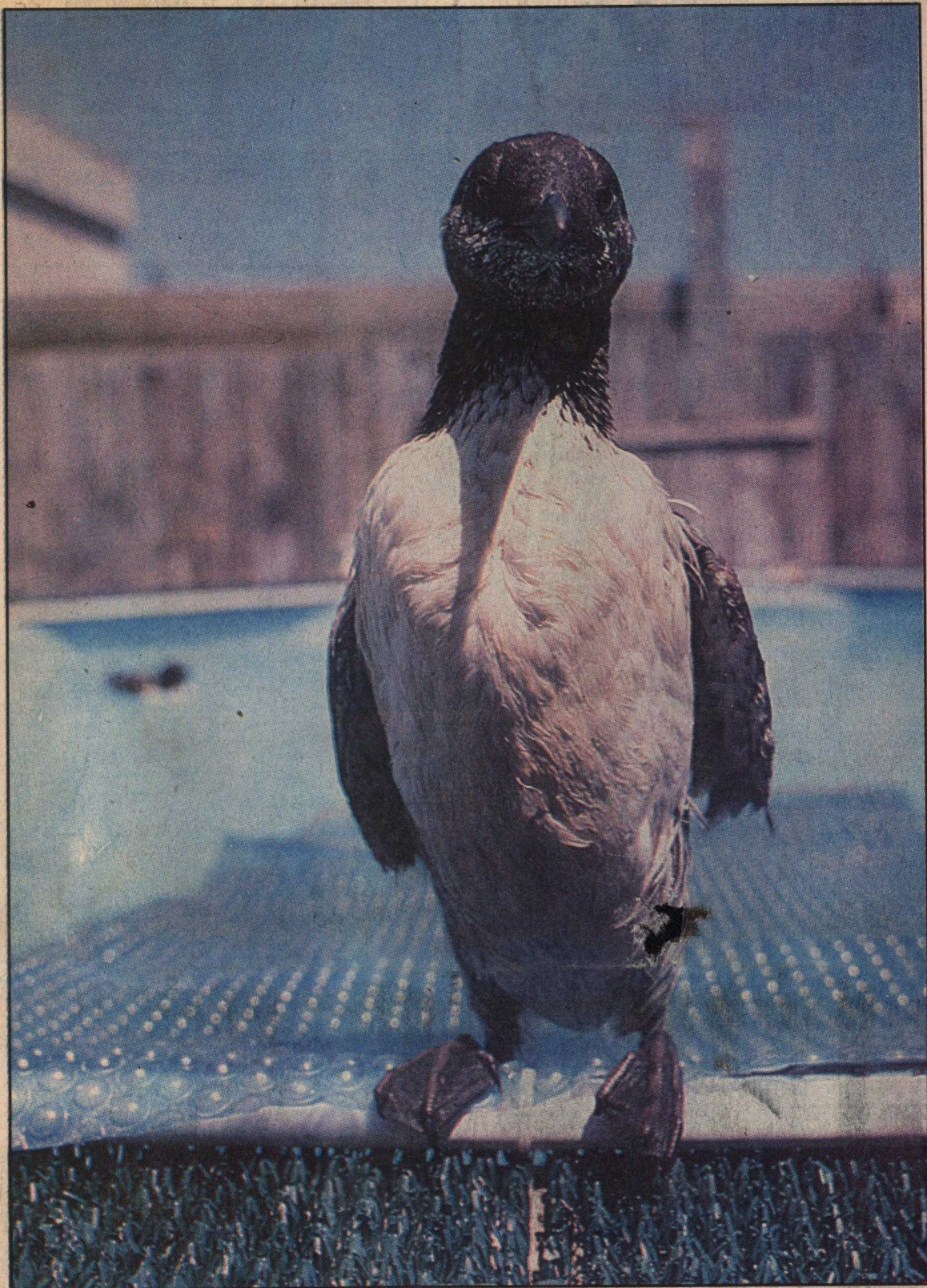


Friendless



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

One of the murrens recuperating at Native Animal Rescue waits to be shipped off.

Wildlife rescuers pack it in

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Fifteen years of wildlife rescue will end Sunday, as Native Animal Rescue announced Friday it will close its doors.

Burned out rescue workers cited years of too much work and not enough money as factors in their decision.

"We can't go on the way we are," said Melanie Dominguez, a former paid staff member who continues to volunteer her services. "It's physically and emotionally impossible to go on."

Since its founding in 1980, the group has rescued sick, injured and orphaned wildlife. Creatures like bobcats and baby blue jays, brown pelicans and foxes have been fed, doctored and cared for until they can be returned to the wild.

The group's cramped quarters at the SPCA's 7th Avenue kennels have been a constant problem, workers said, forcing shy



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Staff and volunteers pack up the offices.

wildlife to recuperate next to barking dogs. This summer's noisy road construction, just a few feet from the outdoor bird pens, hasn't helped either. Nor has an ongoing hostile relationship with the SPCA, which staffers say had asked the group a year ago to find new quarters.

"Basically there is no money and our staff is just totally overworked and can't do it anymore," said NAR board president Gayle Ortiz. "That's the crux of it. Although many people

have supported NAR, it's just not been enough. ... The marine bird crisis really pushed us over the edge."

That crisis was a recent epidemic of sick and dying sea birds affected by a mysterious poison in the Monterey Bay. Staff and volunteers found themselves caring for more than 400 birds in two months, working round the clock and running thousands of dollars into debt to buy the fish, antibiotics and supplies the birds

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needed.

Despite an onslaught of media interest and phones ringing off the hook in response, the donations the group received were dauntingly small.

"It has been building up for so long," agreed Ortiz. "The staff got to its breaking point."

NAR Director Lori Moak-Kean can tell you exactly when that last straw came.

"For me it was on Saturday when (fellow staffer) Miekko and I had to kill a perfectly healthy fawn because we did not have room to take care of it," she said. "I did not get into this job to kill perfectly healthy animals."

The young deer had been hit by a car the night before, she said. It had some abrasions, she said, and some head trauma. But a few days of rest were probably all it needed to regain its health and be returned to the wild.

"When you hit the wall, you hit the wall," Moak-Kean said. "... I looked up and said, that's it. My God, what have we done? We've just killed a perfectly healthy animal. ... If I can't do it the way it's supposed to be done, I can't in good conscience keep doing it."

With three paid staffers and dozens of volunteers, the group has been the main respite for injured sea birds especially, winning praise from state and national groups for its work. But money has continued to be a problem, with almost all the group's \$50,000 yearly budget coming from donations.

For the first time this year, the group got money from the county, Moak-Kean said. But the \$500 was a drop in the bucket, she said, compared to the hundreds of thousands of dollars the county pays the SPCA for animal control — which includes wildlife.

"The SPCA is charged with caring for wildlife and we've done that part of their charge for free," she said.

SPCA representatives said they were "dumbfounded" at the news.

"We had no idea they were in such hard financial straits," said SPCA worker Marilee Geyer. "We certainly had no idea they were in this degree of trouble. ... Maybe this will help to galvanize more support for NAR."

Geyer noted that the closing

comes as the SPCA has been discussing formalizing its relationship with NAR and awarding it a sub-contract for its work in animal rescue.

That was news to the NAR people.

"I've never heard that," Ortiz said. "If we had known that, it would have made a huge difference. Why didn't they tell us? They know we're struggling. It would have been a life raft."

Much of the frustration has come from the tiny 174-square-foot quarters NAR uses in the main SPCA building.

Both sides have known for a long time that NAR would be better housed elsewhere, Geyer said.

"It was a goal that was desired by NAR and the SPCA," Geyer said. "I don't think we kicked them out."

So far, NAR has been unable to find a new home.

Ten years ago, plans were made to move NAR into a house on a half-acre of land next to the SPCA property. For reasons not clear Friday, that never happened. The house has been used recently as a rental, and the SPCA now plans to use it for an educational center.

NAR also looked at a spot at the Long Marine Lab, which works with marine mammals. But the ongoing and unresolved controversy over a proposed housing development at Terrace Point has left the rescue site up in the air as well.

Friday afternoon, Moak-Kean was not at the offices where she has spent the better part of each day for the last nine years.

"I'm going to take a very much needed time off and reflect on all this," she said. "And hopefully put away my anger. If I resign from what was my life's passion, what does that tell you?"

Her personal life has disappeared under the 60-to-80-hour weeks she's put in, she said, and she needs some down time. She tendered her resignation effective Aug. 31 at an emotional NAR board meeting Thursday night.

"I'm very tired," she said. "I'm very hurt and I'm very angry at this community. ... I'm devastated that this community cannot support a wildlife rehabilitation (center). And here we are, the Monterey Bay Sanctuary."

Volunteers were on the job Friday, continuing to feed a young

brown pelican with a hurt wing, and looking for other rescue groups throughout the region to take their remaining animals.

NAR workers said their commitment to helping wildlife remains strong. The group will continue to coordinate foster care in private homes for songbirds and baby mammals, Dominguez said.

They hope the action will wake up the community.

"We'll close the doors for now," Ortiz said. "But what we're really hoping for is a major upswell from the community."

In the meantime, Geyer said the SPCA will step in to make sure that wildlife rescue continues. Friday afternoon, the state Fish and Game Department OK'd a permit for the SPCA to rehabilitate animals, she said.

"Come Sunday, we're going to be up and ready to take care of the animals," Geyer said. "Now that we have the OK from Fish and Game, it's legal and we're going to assemble volunteers and staff."

Will NAR staff and volunteers be among them?

"They're certainly welcome," Geyer said. "But they haven't been willing to talk to us."

The closing raises larger questions, said veterinarian Dr. Dave Casper of the Long Marine Lab, who works closely with NAR.

It comes down to this, he said: whether wildlife rescue and rehabilitation work is important to the community.

If the answer is yes, Casper said, then one solution to the ongoing financial problems would be to have wildlife rescue as a line item in the county budget.

In the meantime, Casper offered his thanks to those he said have given so much.

"Thank you to Lori and the group," Casper said. "The community owes them a very large thank you and a lot of appreciation for all the years they've worked ridiculous hours and been there on Christmas and New Years. Anyway, the animals appreciate it."

Contributions may be sent to Native Animal Rescue, Box 1001, Santa Cruz, Calif. 95061-1001. The NAR phone number, 462-0726, will remain in operation through the end of August with directions for those attempting to help sick, injured or orphaned wildlife.