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Sea birds dying; 18
scientists puzzled

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Pelicans and cormorants, two of the most visible and popular of the sea birds that live and fish off the shores of Monterey Bay, are dying by the dozens and perhaps the hundreds off the coast.

"We've had maybe 30 dead birds here," Patricia Wilson, director of wildlife at the Native Animal Rescue headquarters in Santa Cruz, said Monday, "but we've heard reports that there may be hundreds of dead ones out there."

"They're sick and dying, and we don't know why."

Sick pelicans and cormorants, she said, could be brought to Native Animal Rescue for treatment — which includes doses of vitamin B-1 to counteract possible thiamine deficiencies.

Dead birds, she said, are shipped to the state Department of Fish and Game wildlife investigations laboratory in Rancho Cordova, where carcasses are analyzed — so far without success — in an attempt to

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determine what is killing them.

She said most of the sick and dead sea birds have been found between Natural Bridges State Beach at the far west end of Santa Cruz and 30th Avenue, near Pleasure Point.

Ray Jenkins, superintendent of state parks in the county, also said most of the deaths occurred in the area off Santa Cruz.

"We've had just a few, just a little more than normal" between

the county's north coast and the Pajaro River, Jenkins said.

Although she said she didn't want to theorize about what was killing the birds, Wilson noted that pelicans have been gorging themselves on vast schools of anchovies that have arrived in the bay waters off Santa Cruz in recent weeks.

"Some fish," she said, "have an enzyme that can break down vitamin B-1. That's why we're treating a possible thiamine deficiency."

She said it is possible that large numbers of birds congregating in such close quarters to dive for an-

chovies create a situation in which disease can spread easily.

Wilson said that so far, blood tests of dead birds seem to indicate they are not dying of a bacterial disease that killed scores of local pelicans a few years ago. That bacterial disease, she said, apparently was carried in fish slime and seemed particularly to affect birds near Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey.

A sick pelican can be captured, she said, by dropping a towel or other piece of cloth over it. She described cormorants as "unapproachable until they're almost dead."

Asked to describe symptoms of the illness, Wilson said:

"With pelicans, you'll see them leaning back on their tails, twisting their heads around, contorting their necks and heads. Sometimes their feet curl up. They may flip over onto their backs. In the water, they twist their heads around if they're ill."

Wilson noted that pelicans, whose numbers have increased greatly since dropping to a dangerously low level two decades ago, are still an endangered species. The birds, she said, are susceptible to the pesticide DDT — which, although banned in this country, is still sprayed on fields near pelican breeding grounds in Mexico.

Native Animal Rescue is located in the SPCA animal shelter on Rodriguez Street off Seventh Avenue.