

# Bird deaths may be linked to toxic algae

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SANTA CRUZ — The hundreds of dead and dying cormorants and pelicans found along beaches between Natural Bridges and Schwann Lake may be the victims of toxic algae blooms.

Mary Silver, a UC Santa Cruz professor of marine sciences, received test results from an expert in Florida that showed the presence of a toxic algae that causes red tides in local waters.

"It could be the explanation," said Silver. "Now what we need to do is test the

birds."

Known as dinoflagellate, the algae causes shellfish poisoning when it occurs in high quantity, Silver said. The algae can make shellfish deadly to birds — and to humans, if amounts are high enough.

"Whether that's the source of it is not clear," cautioned Silver, who would prefer to have scientific tests confirm any findings.

She said the algae has not been known to bloom in large amounts in this area; however, it does bloom in high quantity further north.

The algae becomes toxic as it travels up

the food chain, Silver said. Most likely, she said, something ate the algae, which in turn was eaten by anchovies that were eaten by the birds. She said birds do not usually eat algae.

Patricia Wilson, director of Native Animal Rescue, said schools of anchovies have appeared in the area recently.

Silver said that this type of algae can cause red tides which make shellfish poisonous to ocean animals and humans. She said red tides were reported a few weeks ago in some areas of the county.

"They can be real spotty," said Silver about the tides. "They can be in small

areas, and then the water can be clear as a bell right next to them."

Silver said that officials from the state's Department of Health monitor the area's waters every two weeks to make sure that the algae's level is safe. Scientists were last here Sept. 9, she said.

Department scientists will return to the county Sunday to conduct tests for toxicity in local mussels, with results ready on Tuesday. Tests on the birds will be completed next week, Silver said.

Selling shellfish is banned this time of year because of the threat of poisons, said Silver. However, she said that people con-

tinue to eat mussels. That might change after the health department's toxicity tests on mussels are completed.

Meanwhile, dead and ailing birds continue to wash up on the beaches, according to Wilson of Native Animal Rescue.

"We're still getting calls on dead ones on the beaches, and we're still getting sick ones in," Wilson said that her office has probably taken in 20 to 30 sick birds and over 100 dead birds.

She said bacterial tests and searches for toxins have come up alternately negative and positive, but "nothing conclusive."