

Animal deaths still a mystery

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MONTEREY — Researchers dissecting sea otters and birds washing up from the Monterey Bay this week are not finding any quick answers for the sudden rash of deaths among the animals.

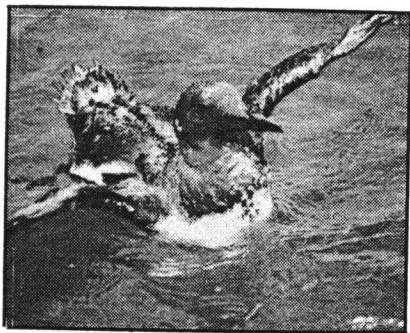
Another otter was found dead Friday, bringing the total to 14 in the past two weeks. And sick and dying birds continued to arrive at the Native Animal Rescue in Santa Cruz, where volunteers have worked with about 300 murre, pelicans and scoters since mid-June. About half the sick birds have survived.

Ten otters and several sea birds have been packed in ice chests and sent Federal Express to the diagnostic laboratory of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Madison, Wis.

There the carcasses have been examined and screened for common, man-made toxins — including metaldehyde, organophosphate and carbamate — which would have indicated that the otters or birds ate several specific poisons or pesticides.

No toxins have been found so far, and blood samples taken from live otters in the bay this week showed nothing out of the ordinary.

Further blood tests are being conducted on dead otters to see if other



STRUGGLING:

A weakened common murre takes refuge in the still waters of the Santa Cruz small craft harbor this week. Hundreds of dead and dying sea birds have been found lately along the shores of the Monterey Bay.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

pesticides, oil residues, bacteria, or a virus are killing the otters.

"If the recent die-off is due to a viral agent, it may take several weeks before the laboratory is able to isolate something," said Ken Peterson, a spokesman for the Monterey Bay Aquarium where scientists are assisting with the investigation.

Scientists are also checking for a link between an increase in sea lion deaths this month in the San Francisco Bay Area. Those deaths were caused by a bacterial disease called leptospirosis. There are no known cases of sea otters contracting this disease.

Veterinary pathologists in Madison

are incorporating information about the deaths of all the birds and mammals into their investigation of the otter deaths.

In their own review, state Fish and Game researchers in Santa Cruz found evidence of paralytic shellfish poisoning in mussels Friday, but only half the level that would trigger an official warning.

Fish and Game biologist Jack Ames said he also received dozens more reports of sick and dying otters, but most of those were simply napping in the kelp and swam off when approached.

Ames said one possible culprit in the otter deaths is domoic acid made by a marine phytoplankton, capable of caus-

ing nerve damage in animals.

Some researchers have blamed domoic acid for the 1961 invasion of Santa Cruz by disoriented seabirds, an incident that partly inspired Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 movie "The Birds."

Northern California also has experienced recent red tides, which can poison mussels and ultimately the animals they feed on.

But Tomio Iwamoto, curator of ichthyology at the California Academy of Sciences, said the region's intense red tides ended six months ago and recent incidents have been relatively mild.

In Santa Cruz, volunteers at Native Animal Rescue are trying to care for the ailing seabirds.

"The past week and a half has been amazing," said a harried Lori Moak-Kean, NAR's executive director on Friday. "We've had nine birds in here already just this morning."

With a cause of death still eluding researchers, it's a depressing game of wait and see for people who care for the birds and mammals in the Monterey Bay.

Those people include Ellen Faurot-Daniels, a researcher at Friends of the Sea Otter in Monterey.

"In the meantime, the cause of death remains, and may always remain, as 'undetermined,'" she said. "It's very disturbing."