

Fishing-gear injury underlines importance of California coast cleanup project

By Sylvia Wright

The black-crowned night heron was the victim of human carelessness, caught in fishing line that had left it helplessly snared in a tree branch.

But human concern was responsible for the heron's rescue and delivery to UC Davis wildlife health experts, who rehabilitated the bird and set it free.

These veterinarians know that one-by-one rescues are a limited solution for California wildlife.

That's why they are also working on a longer-term mission to reduce fishing-gear litter along the California coasts and protect birds and other animals from such entanglements in the future.

Black-crowned night herons are large, elegant-looking birds that live in freshwater and saltwater marshes and along creeks, and hunt for fish and other small animals.

This particular heron had the misfortune one night to become entangled in discarded fishing line. When it flew home to its daytime perch in a tree, the line caught on branches.

Carried it to UC Davis

The people who found the injured bird hanging from the tree by its right wing carried it to the teaching hospital at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

One of the vet school's many teaching and research programs is the Wildlife Health Center. That center, in turn, has a program named the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, which treats water-dwelling birds (such as scoters, murrelets, grebes, gulls and herons) that are injured by toxic spills and other causes.

The network works in partnership with the non-profit International Bird Rescue Research Center to operate one of the largest seabird rehabilitation centers in the world. Together they rehabilitate more than 2,500 animals yearly from the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

In addition to providing emergency treatment, the network veterinarians and researchers teach veterinary students about wild bird care. They also study problems in wild bird biology and medicine, producing discoveries that are used around the world.

The injured heron went into the expert hands of those vets at the San Francisco Bay Oiled Wildlife Care and Education Center in Fairfield.

'Skilled clinicians made this bird whole again, and they are backed up by a whole team of UC Davis experts working to make the environment safer and healthier for wildlife.'

Walter Boyce, co-director of the Wildlife Health Center

"It was great that the bird recovered so quickly," said Bill Ferrier, co-director of the California Raptor Center and a staff veterinarian with Campus Veterinarian Services.

"The attending veterinarian, Shannon Riggs, told me once the heron figured out it could fly, it was all over the cage anxious to get back home.

"It is very rewarding to be able to help a wild critter over a hump and see them respond as this one did."

Lost and abandoned fishing gear

Another of the Wildlife Health Center's programs is the SeaDoc Society, which supports and conducts research in marine ecosystems.

The SeaDoc Society is beginning the second year of a project that is testing and refining methods for removing lost and abandoned fishing gear from the California coast.

Already SeaDoc divers have removed nearly 10 tons of lost fishing gear from the waters around the California Channel Islands, including nearly 250 commercial lobster traps, many fishing rods and sport traps, and a huge fishing net covering 5,000 square feet of the seafloor..

In fact, just when the unlucky heron was found tangled in fishing line, the SeaDoc Society was set to launch a fishing-line recycling program at California piers.

And that's how it all came together on Feb. 12 at the San Francisco Bay Oiled Wildlife Care and Education Center in Fairfield: As UC Davis veterinarians Bill Ferrier and Shannon Riggs used epoxy to replace the heron's nine broken feathers with donor feathers, SeaDoc Society director Kirsten Gilardi told a gathering of nearly a dozen reporters and photographers about the upcoming fishing-line recycling effort.

From San Francisco to the Mexican border

Funded by \$80,000 in grants from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Laurel Foundation, the project will stretch from San Francisco to the Mexican border.

Volunteers from local wildlife rehabilitation agencies will help UC Davis set up recycling bins on these piers, where anglers can discard unwanted fishing line instead of throwing it into the ocean.

"This is a great example of UC Davis working from animals to ecosystems," said Walter Boyce, co-director of the Wildlife Health Center.

On the home page: A black-crowned night-heron is anesthetized before it receives new feathers through an imping, or grafting, procedure at the San Francisco Bay Oiled Wildlife Care and Education Center in Fairfield. (January Bill/UC Davis photo)

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Normally, a bird given feather implants would require a week or more before being released back into the wild. But this heron, unlucky no longer, was flying so energetically in its cage just hours after surgery that his caregivers feared it would re-injure itself if it were forced to stay cooped up.

So, at daybreak on the next day, the bird was set free.

It glided from a rescuer's arms to the ground, then flapped up into a tree. For a few moments it perched there, shuddering its feathers into place. Then it launched off the branch and flew away — on a new wing — and a prayer for a fishing-line-free future.

Sylvia Wright covers the environmental sciences for the UC Davis News Service.

http://www.ucdavis.edu/spotlight/0307/heron_rehab.html