
“A Tale of Two Pelicans”

Dr Halina Burmei

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1. Introduction

These two case histories serve as a talking point for many of the issues facing our pelicans such as entanglements, habituation to anglers from being fed fish scraps, and rubbish tips that provide an unhealthy feeding ground for wildlife.

2. Case study one: Clarry Claughton

Clarry was a pelican spotted on the Swan River at Bayswater, Perth near Claughton Reserve with a large amount of fishing line hanging from his beak. Two WASR volunteers, Halina and Louise, lured him out of the water and into a leg snare made of heavy gauge fishing line.(1)He was obviously habituated to getting ‘handouts’ from fishers as he swam over within a minute or two of being shown the fish and the whole rescue took just 10 minutes. Examination revealed him to be in good body condition and unfortunately the fishing line disappeared down his throat with no hook visible or palpable. Clarry was taken to a bird veterinarian for X-ray (Figure 1). This revealed two large hooks, one in the proventriculus and the other in the ventriculus. The vet was able to remove the first hook fairly easily and then used an endoscope to try to remove the other hook from the ventriculus without incising it. This was unsuccessful so he was plucked and an incision was made into the ventriculus and sutured. We were told there was a significant risk that the wound could break down, usually by day 5, and that he needed to be kept very quiet and still and on a liquid diet, anti-inflammatories for pain relief and prophylactic antibiotics (Enrofloxacin 15mg/kg b.d 7 days and Meloxicam 0.5mg/kg b.d. 10 d then prn). Weight 6.5kg. Clarry was bought into home care with WASR.

The first challenge was in housing a pelican in a small enough area to prevent him pacing or attempting to fly, while providing enough space to provide him with a dish of water large enough for him to fit the whole length of his bill into, and also enable him to stand up and stretch out his neck and wings. He was placed in a soft sided ‘puppy play pen’ (as in Figure 2) for 3 days, and then a small area of the room was screened off to give him room to stretch.

Below: Clarry’s X-ray showing the two large hooks
Right: Pelican ‘Sally Shoalwater’ in a soft-sided pen



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Days 1-7

- Indoors in a confined space initially 1m-diameter pen then 2x1.5m area.
- Days 1-3 he did not stand
- Vetafarm Seatabs TM were given throughout, 6 tablets per day
- On a liquid diet approx. 650 ml/d, in three divided doses. Initially SparkTM solution (for two doses) then a Hills A/D TM slurry with diluted Spark, then by day 3 a mix of pureed headless mulies (Southern Blue pilchards) with A/D and diluted spark. Feeds were administered by filling up a small 100ml bottle (joey bottle), covering the top with the thumb and then gently introducing it past the glottis and down the throat.
- By day 7 fish were gradually introduced, first mulies with interval feeds of A/D slurry, gradually building up to herring which he self-fed (20% + of his bodyweight in fish per day were offered)

Day 8 Moved outdoors to a 3mx3m soft-sided aviary. He fretted and paced, perhaps because he could see out to the larger enclosure. He was brought back inside overnight.

Day 9 Back down on his hocks! Given Meloxicam and kept indoors for 48hrs in a confined space

Day 11-15 Placed in a small aviary, this time it was screened completely with dense curtains and sheets and furnished with a small shell pond and low soft perch only. He tolerated this quite well and self-fed very enthusiastically.

Day 16 Although he had finished his medications and his abdominal wound had healed the veterinarian didn't want him to be released as his feathers had yet to grow back from the areas where they were plucked. He was growing tired of his small enclosure and pacing again. We asked for assistance from a nearby wildlife group (Darling Range Wildlife Shelter ⁽²⁾ with an outdoor waterbird facility with soft netted sides (approx. 6x8m) and a pond who offered to house him.

Day 25 Just before his release date Clarry got spooked on a windy day and flew across and smashed straight into an upright pole causing a scalping injury where a flap of skin was lifted off the base of his bill. An emergency visit to the avian vet for suturing followed

Day 26-33 Back in home care in a small-screened aviary.

Day 33 HE WAS VERY HAPPY TO BE RELEASED

EPILOGUE 5 weeks after release Clarry turned up again in Bayswater and sabotaged our attempts to rescue a more timid pelican by stealing all the herring we had laid out next to a leg snare. He obviously hadn't learnt his lesson about walking into a leg snare. He had multiple small tears in his pouch that may have been caused by barbed wire or he could have been hooked with a gang of small hooks which tore out. We didn't think they warranted catching him and having them sutured given the difficulties we had keeping him safe in captivity.



Left: Clarry shortly after suffering his head wound. There was a large haematoma present.

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3. Case study two: Sally Shoalwater

Sally was a juvenile female pelican, 4.9kg, perhaps 6mths or so old, who was found standing in a front yard in the beachside southern suburb of Shoalwater in Perth, trying to drink water from a sprinkler. She was moderately dehydrated, in reasonable body condition and had a heavy lice infestation. There was nothing else to explain why she was doing something so unusual. The weather was mild. She was brought into home care and kept indoors in a soft sided 'puppy play pen'. Sally was rehydrated orally with Spark solution, Polyaid and multivitamins, however she kept regurgitating her feeds. Subcutaneous fluids were given to maintain her hydration. Pelicans vary in their propensity to regurgitate so feeds were adjusted; smaller volumes were given more frequently and she was observed for longer periods after being 'assisted' with liquids poured carefully down her throat. Her faeces were unusual: they were liquid but in small multiple patches in her bedding, each one approximately the size of a 50cent piece. After 48 hrs she regurgitated a hard plastic cylinder which was packed solid with some material. The cylinder measured 3cm in height and 1.5 cm in diameter and may have been used in plumbing or electrical works.



Left: The foreign body regurgitated by pelican Sally

Once Sally had regurgitated the plastic cylinder she proceeded to pass large volumes of foul liquid faeces and no longer regurgitated. She was administered a re-feeding regime (3,4) with electrolytes followed by a commercial diet (Hills A/D) as a slurry, then pureed fish and finally whole fish as she made a rapid recovery and was released day 12 at 5.8kg.

Epilogue: Sally was seen again two weeks after release and seemed well. She was rescued again about 6 weeks after release, with a fish hook and line entanglement, not far from her release site. The entanglement was minor so it was a 'CDR' catch-disentangle-release.

4. Discussion

Waterbirds and recreational anglers don't always make a very good combination. Many people find the lure of feeding wildlife irresistible and people will either deliberately feed their undesirable fish or fish scraps to pelicans, or toss their left-over bait into the water where gulls, cormorants and pelicans vie for the leftovers. Cormorants and pelicans then get habituated to human contact and learn to associate fishing activities with free food. The sight of one bird excitedly diving at a handout then attracts other birds who in turn learn to associate people fishing with a free feed. Some birds will then go on to steal bait (and sometimes swallow bait and hooks), others may simply swim through lines and get hooked while some birds, principally birds like herons and gulls, get tangled in discarded and snagged fishing line.

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We urge recreational fishers to

- Use barbless hooks or better still, circle hooks,
- Clean up any plastic bags and tackle they see while out fishing,
- Always stay with their lines and never leave them unattended, and

if they accidentally hook a bird we suggest they try to lure it towards them with some bait or fish gently reel the line in and attempt to capture the bird and remove the line or ring for assistance.

Pelicans breed close to Perth on offshore islands including Penguin Island near Shoalwater. There is a very large rubbish tip nearby on the mainland that is not covered and pelicans, silver gulls and other wildlife regularly forage at the tip. Some pelicans come in unwell with no specific signs and subsequently regurgitate or pass plastic bags. We suspect that parent pelicans may forage at the tip to feed their chicks and then later on chicks learn to forage at the tip. Every year WASR sees quite a few juvenile pelicans turn up starving with deformed wings, most probably the result of fractures or dislocations while young. We do not know if a poor diet contributes to these injuries.

References

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