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Rescued pelican heads south to the border

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It's not everyday a 15-pound pelican with a six-foot wingspan approaches a fisher at the Galveston District's Jadwin fishing pier. It's also not everyday that the same pelican would steal bait from someone's fishing line.

"That's exactly what happened," said Steve Walls, a regulatory project manager with the Galveston District. "The pelican had a broken wing and would come into the docks and steal fish off of people's hooks. He became so notorious, people named him Buddy."

The Jadwin fishing pier unofficially became home to the injured pelican in early November, according to Walls. Buddy would sleep atop the pilings beneath the pier.

"He was probably injured on a shrimp trawler," said Walls. "The hungrier he got, the more he learned that if he came in and scavenged, he could get people to feed him."

"We noticed the pelican getting bolder and bolder and more desperate," said Walls. "Buddy became a little bit of a fish thief. I think that was his downfall and his saving at the same time."

"We called the Fish and Wildlife Service and they told us, 'if you guys can catch him and take it to the rehab center, we'll support you doing it' and if things got worse, to call them back," said Walls. "We were thinking we don't have the expertise to capture a bird with a beak like that. They're big birds."

"We were out flounder fishing one day and Buddy tried to grab someone's bait when he got hooked," said Walls. "He was trying to expel it and he couldn't. He had broken the line and still had the hook, a sinker and a steel line attached to him. I was worried it was going to wrap around his beak and he wouldn't be able to eat."

"I got him loose and noticed that he continued to hang around so we called the Fish and Wildlife Service back," said Walls. "One of the Fish and Wildlife Service employees, Donna Anderson, works at the Jadwin Building a few days a week from the Clear Lake office."

Walls and Anderson went out to the pier looking for Buddy.

One of the fishers noticed the two looking for the pelican and said, "Buddy sleeps over there."

"One of the fishermen had a bucket of small fish and I asked if I could have some for Buddy," said Walls. "We threw a fish by the bulkhead and when Buddy got closer, we put a net over him but he got out. He was so hungry, he hung around. I threw another fish by the bulkhead and he came up and grabbed the fish. This time, Donna from the Fish and Wildlife Service, put him in a headlock."



*Rescued pelican, Buddy, sits in a crate at a wildlife rehabilitation facility in Clear Lake, Texas. The pelican was found injured at the Galveston District's Jadwin Pier.
(Photo courtesy of www.wrande.org)*

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“She grabbed him by the beak and I got a box,” said Walls. “She literally got him in a headlock. We drove him down to a wildlife rehabilitator in the Clear Lake area.”

“The bird had mites and lice. While I was driving, Donna wanted to stop because mites were crawling on her, but I suggested she hold on to him,” said Walls. “I could see us heading down IH-45 with a pelican loose in the vehicle.”

“The pelican was emaciated and dehydrated,” said Walls. “Fluids were given to him, along with antibiotics, a bath, lice and pain medicine.”

“I called the rehabilitation center the next morning and asked about Buddy. I was told ‘the pelican bit someone twice this morning, so he’s doing well,’” said Walls. “He ate 150 fish that morning and has been eating several hundred fish a day since then. Although he has ‘sauerkraut’ breath, he is now out in the open. He seems to be doing well.”

Permits have been obtained for Buddy to head south to a zoo in Brownsville, Texas, with two other birds. The birds collectively have been named the three amigos.

“The birds won’t have to worry about cold winters,” said Walls. “We are taking contributions to the wildlife fund for Buddy’s rehab since he lost his fishing privileges for ‘fowling’ up and getting caught.”



A hook is removed from a pelican’s beak at a wildlife rehabilitation facility in Clear Lake, Texas. The pelican was rescued by Steve Walls of the district’s Regulatory Branch. (Photo courtesy of www.wrande.org)