

BAY AREA

Sick seabirds set right after straying ashore

Red phalaropes feed with whales, rarely seen on land

- [Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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A perilous and nearly fatal Bay Area excursion for 30 seabirds of a species that is rarely seen on land turned into a life-saving experience Thursday when the tiny creatures were released back into the wild.

The gray-and-white red phalaropes bolted into the air from three "pet taxi" boxes after representatives of the International Bird Rescue Research Center opened the doors on a beach at Fort Baker in Marin County.

The gregarious birds, which are most often seen feeding on the backs of whales, immediately formed into a tight flock, swooped across the harbor and settled as one on the now-smooth surface of San Francisco Bay, where they basked in the brilliant sun as the tide carried them out the Golden Gate.

"Beautiful," said Nancy Mix, a volunteer from Concord, as she followed their progress with her binoculars. "That is a beautiful sight."

Mix was among the volunteers and rescue staff who had spent the past 12 days nursing the emaciated birds back to health. The birds were among 90 that were apparently blown to shore between Dec. 24 and Dec. 28. They apparently had not been eating and were so weak that rescuers simply plucked them bare-handed from among their dead comrades off beaches in Monterey Bay, San Mateo County and other locations.

Many of the birds, which normally weigh about 1.6 ounces, had lost as much as a third of their weight, according to Megan Prelinger, the assistant rehabilitation manager for the rescue research center, located in Cordelia. Others were too tired to preen and were so dirty and disheveled that they had lost their waterproofing. The sight of so many phalaropes, dead or alive, is extremely rare, said Prelinger, whose organization normally sees four or, at most, five of the species a year.

"All we know is that for some reason there was a large stranding of weak, emaciated birds," she said. "That's highly unusual."

Red phalaropes, whose scientific name is *Phalaropus fulicaria*, spend virtually their entire lives in the open ocean migrating to Alaska in the spring, where they raise their young, and South America in the winter, a distance of some 5,000 miles interspersed with only occasional stops along shore.

The birds feed on zooplankton, krill, arrow worms and amphipods found in the open water and commonly ride the backs of gray whales feasting on the various micro-invertebrates that keep the leviathans company.

"The birds perch on the backs of whales and feed off them," Prelinger said. "They follow larger species in the Pacific Ocean currents during their migration, which is one of the longest migratory routes of any birds. And they are tiny. You could mail one for just two stamps."

When feeding on their own, they spin around on the surface of the water, bringing tiny insects and other delights to the surface. One native Alaskan name for the bird is Nimishuruk, which means "spins in a circle."

The birds' underparts turn a rusty red color when they are nesting, which explains their name. The females of the species are more colorful, 20 percent larger than the males and more liberated than humans. The males are responsible for incubating the eggs and rearing the young, allowing the females to mate with multiple partners.

But "Sex and the City" it is not. Female red phalaropes have been known to produce four sets of four eggs in one nesting season, expunging from their bodies a total mass that is twice their own weight. The high birthrate is an attempt to replace eggs taken from the birds' shoreline nests by foxes, weasels, jaegers, gulls and owls.

What caused the holiday stranding is a mystery, but rescuers believe the birds may not have been able to find enough food because of warmer ocean temperatures or high seas. Strong westerly winds probably forced them to the Northern California coast.

The 30 birds released Thursday were fed worms and krill and given therapeutic baths in warm water, which, Prelinger said, stimulates them to preen, a process that helps make the interlocking feathers waterproof.

Eight birds died in captivity.

The remarkable odyssey will be repeated in the coming days and weeks by the remaining birds at the rescue center, where they are still in the process of being fattened up.

"It's a lot of work," said Mix, a bird book in one hand and binoculars in the other, "but it's a labor of love."

Red phalaropes at a glance

Scientific name: *Phalaropus fulicaria*

Common name: Red phalarope

Description: Slender-necked birds, 6-10 inches in length and weighing about 1.6 ounces. They have lobed toes and a straight, slender bill. Predominantly gray and white in winter, they develop chestnut-red markings in summer. Females are larger and more colorful.

Range and habitat: Red phalaropes breed in the coastal tundra of the Arctic regions of North America and Eurasia and winter mostly in the tropical waters off South America and Africa, but also as far north as western North America. Phalaropes are halophilic, which means they love

salt. Classified as pelagic shorebirds, they spend most of their time in the open sea but have been seen feeding on brine shrimp and flies in Mono Lake, where the water is twice as salty as seawater. Red phalaropes are prone to "wrecks" that take place irregularly in November and December when hundreds of birds may be blown onshore by severe gales.

Nesting: Typical avian sex roles are reversed with the larger females pursuing males and competing for nesting territory, aggressively defending nests and mates. After the females lay their clutch of four to six eggs, they begin their southern migration, leaving the males to incubate the eggs and care for the young. The chicks are able to fly within 18 days.

Feeding: Because they are not built for diving, they have developed a unique way of feeding: They swim in fast, tight circles on the surface of the sea, creating a whirlpool of plankton they then sweep up with their bills. They are often found in the company of whales, where they are thought to feed on parasites and crustaceans associated with whales.

Sources: Monterey Bay Aquarium; Peterson's Field Guide to Birds; California Department of Fish and Game

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