

# REVENGE OF THE BIRDS



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**by**

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Published by  
The North Pole Press

Published by The North Pole Press

Smoky Mountains, Tennessee

ISBN13: 978-1-7324958-8-3

Cover design by Mary Moore

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Library of Congress Control Number 2019905946

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Printed in the United States of America

# **P**ROLOGUE

Before the events of San Clemente, California, no one would have believed that birds could become rabid. But the death of a sole Cockatoo disproved everything they previously believed. Now the authorities thought they had stopped the pandemic from spreading. The birds that were infected by the newly discovered Super Aviary Rabies Virus had thankfully been eliminated by the military and local law enforcement, or died off naturally from the disease.

People that had been attacked were still receiving rabies vaccinations to stem the deadly effects of the disease, but their chances of survival were now good. A relative few had thought their brush with the birds was so minor that they did not need to seek medical attention. It was a fatal mistake. Even the most minor scratch later infected the patient to a point where the vaccine could not contain the virus from spreading, and they lost the battle for their life. Other than these unfortunate souls, most people had been spared the painful infection and death, thanks to the SARV rabies vaccine, which was still being flown in daily to treat the hundreds of patients needing the injection.

It had only been a matter of days since the rabid birds had attacked and killed hundreds and injured many hundreds more at the San Clemente Pier. People were trying to put their lives back together and

constantly kept an eye to the sky above in case any rabid birds remained. There were very few birds at all, and most of these were small songbirds and not infected. Warnings from the CDC continued to flood the airwaves advising people to be vigilant of gathering birds, and to seek immediate medical attention if they had any altercation with a bird, wild or domestic.

The gulls that stopped in San Clemente, California, had eaten their fill and were on the move again. They had made it up the coast to Laguna Beach after beginning their migration from Mexico several days before. They had a long way to go to Mono Lake but had been doing well. They were making progress covering the vast expanse that lay before them.

But now they had trouble focusing their intention to make it to their nesting grounds. Something was growing in their minds with ever-increasing urgency. Got to eat, gotta eat, GOTTA EAT! It had dominated their thoughts soon after they filled their bellies in San Clemente. First beginning as a whisper, it now screamed in their heads continuously, often blocking out their inherent need to reach their nesting ground to mate and continue their species.

While there were loads of people walking the streets and beaches in Laguna, the flock hadn't found anything to eat until they made it to Emerald Bay. There they saw a giant ball of fish boiling at the surface and immediately dove into the frenzy before them. They were not alone, and many of the resident gulls and other seabirds like California Brown Pelicans and the endangered California Least Tern were fishing with

them.

As the gulls snapped up the fish, some either escaped their beaks at the last moment or were cut in half at the speed of the attack. Those pieces were grabbed by the other birds and immediately ingested.

And that's how it all began, again.

# C H A P T E R O N E

It had only been a few days since the injection of the antiviral to bird attack victims and the death of the remaining infected birds. Many things were slowly returning to normal. Professor Ellen Revere had flown back to Cornell and was working at her lab on further applications of the Super Aviary Rabies Virus. Tory McKnight and Dr. Bill Forrester were at the University of California at San Diego working on the vaccine that would cure all the species of infected birds, and prevent further outbreaks.

The dreaded Super Aviary Rabies Virus that caused the bird disease in San Clemente could still become a serious problem. They had a variety of strains they thought might possibly work, but could not be sure until they field-tested each one on infected birds.

While the two were hunched over their own microscopes, Dr. Forrester's wife, Natalie, walked in carrying sacks from a local fast-food restaurant.

Tory looked up at her and said smiling, "So that is why my stomach is making all that noise."

"Is it really noon already?" asked Dr. Forrester.

Natalie came up and giving him a quick peck on the cheek said. "Try 1:30, my dear. I knew you would be starving this poor girl, so I took the liberty of getting you both something to eat."

Tory thanked Natalie and immediately dove into the

contents of the bag.

"So? Any progress? I thought you would be out and about preventing any possibility of a recurrence of the San Clemente incident by now," said Natalie.

Dr. Forrester rubbed the two-day growth on his face and said, "We would if we weren't missing a critical element in all this."

Tory snickered and said, "Yeah, test subjects."

Natalie asked, "Has no one found the possibility of an infected bird anywhere around San Clemente?"

"Only a few birds are living in San Clemente at all, and none of them show signs of the infection. And trying to catch a healthy bird is quite a challenge at any time. Plus we can't be sure a canary or parakeet would exhibit the same elements of the disease those birds did," Dr. Forrester said poking at the dead gull in front of him.

"Besides," continued Tory, "While we can infect a healthy bird, it would be better to get one already infected to guarantee we are treating the original infection versus one introduced in the lab."

A formal triumvirate had been established among the Center for Disease Control, the Orange County Sheriff's Department, and the University of California-San Diego to watch for any suspected activity of abnormal bird behavior, especially bird attacks or large flocking throughout the Orange County area.

This watch stretched from as far south as Oceanside all the way up to Long Beach. Since nothing had taken place in the other counties, the various agencies thought anything peculiar would appear in this area first. Since



the "die-off," as they called it, nothing unusual had taken place.

Natalie shook her head, "I can't believe every single bird infected dropped dead. I mean, I have to say I'm glad they did. This disease could have spread like wildfire. But still, it just amazes me nothing was left."

"Except all the bodies," sighed Tory, "They are still losing people over at the Medical Center. Chris told me two more people passed away yesterday."

Chris Palmer was Tory's boyfriend and was responsible for discovering the epidemic in San Clemente. He was a full-time lifeguard when the incidents began and had witnessed the first attacks on people. He was now working at Saddleback Memorial as a medical intern and studying for his medical degree.

Dr. Forrester said, "We knew this was going to happen. Too many people received the treatment too late to stop the disease. Thank God we got to as many with the vaccine as we did, or we could have lost far more."

"Yeah, like me," said Natalie. Natalie Forrester was one of the survivors from a bird attack at the San Clemente Pier. She had received a nasty scratch while fleeing with her husband, Tory, and Chris from the fatal onslaught while at a festival.

"It still spooks me to think if we hadn't come up with the virus in time..." and Dr. Forrester's voice trailed off.

Natalie got up and gave him a smile, saying, "Ah, but you did, and I am here to prove it."

Dr. Forrester smiled back at his wife and patted the hand that had the injury from the bird.

"At least you are not having to treat more new

patients," added Natalie.

"Yes, but that doesn't bring us any closer to solving this problem," said Tory.

"And this is just the same as that time in Bodega Bay before this?" asked Natalie.

"Apparently," answered Dr. Forrester while chewing on some French fries. "The birds just suddenly died off as if their bodies instantly shut down, all at the same time. According to what we can piece together, it took longer this time. which could mean the virus was stronger or its effects weaker, we just don't know."

"And without a living specimen, we can't see if this vaccine would completely eradicate the virus, put it into remission, or just weaken its effects," said Tory.

"Assuming it had any effect at all," said Dr. Forrester. "We won't know if it works fast enough to combat the disease. We are dealing with a very high metabolism in birds. Every day that gets by us lessens the chance we can find a bird in time to counteract the infection."

They had plenty of dead infected birds and multiple vials of their fluids handy, but the disease changed once the body died, and they could not be sure they were working with the same properties as a living host might have. The CDC confirmed their suspicions and said that they, too, thought the disease was not necessarily the same after death, even though it would still be highly contagious to any animal that came into contact with a carcass.

Natalie felt the frustration of the two scientists. So trying to lighten things, she asked Tory, "So how is Chris doing at the Medical Center?"

Chris Palmer had accepted Dr. Forrester's offer to enter the medical program at UCSD, and his first project was to assist the remaining patients in San Clemente. He was also still filling in part-time as a lifeguard when needed.

Tory shrugged, "Being back at Saddleback Memorial, we talk daily, but he is into his studies and working with patients, and I am into this. We don't have as much to say to each other right now. We are hoping to get together next weekend if he can get the time off between his guard duties and the hospital."

Deciding that was the wrong subject as well, Natalie asked her husband, "Have you heard from Ellen?"

Dr. Forrester looked up smiling and said, "I'll thank you not to mention that woman's name in front of me. She is taking the best assistant I'll ever have away from me in less than a month. I will be forced to go back and do all my own work until I can find a decent assistant again. And of course, they will be distantly inferior to Miss McKnight."

Tory smiled at his comment. She was anxious to be working with one of the leading people in her chosen field of Ornithology, but would also regret leaving Dr. Forrester and San Diego for Cornell University. *Everything is a trade-off*, she thought to herself.

Professor Ellen Revere was also working on a vaccine for the birds, but she decided to try the virus on mammals to make sure that the antivirus had the same positive results as it did on the humans they had treated. Because there were no known infected mammals on the loose, she had decided to infect her test subjects. There

was no other way to make sure the disease wouldn't spread through the animal kingdom.

"So far, she is still hopeful for positive conclusions with her experiments," said Dr. Forrester. "We believe that the virus doesn't mutate in mammals as we might have first feared. Of course, she has the same problem having to infect the animals artificially. Again, we can only hope the cure would work in the wild."

"Well that's still good news," Natalie beamed.

Dr. Forrester and Tory just nodded alternately munching on their lunch and looking back into their microscopes. Natalie, decided it was time to leave them to their work having completed her mission to feed them. She asked her husband if he would be home in time for dinner and extended an invitation to Tory.

Dr. Forrester said, "I should be, yes."

Tory excused herself from the invite saying she had several personal projects including laundry needing to be done, but requested a rain check.

"Anytime," Natalie said as she opened the door and said goodbye to them. Once through the door, she began scratching the area on her hand where she received the injury from the bird in San Clemente. "Damn thing, never stops itching" she mumbled to herself as she walked down the hall.



The gulls had filled their bellies with enough fish for the moment. Usually, it would have been enough to suppress their cravings, but some of the gulls still felt

the urge to continue feeding. Most of the other birds had already flown off, with the pelicans being the first to leave. The California Gulls from San Clemente were still snapping at the remaining birds and any floating pieces of fish.

Eventually, the resident birds returned to the shore, and only the migrating birds were left floating in the surf. These birds seemed to fight the instinct between continuing their migration north and searching for more food.

The migrating gulls were far more aggressive in their feeding frenzy than the local birds, a few of which became injured when they got too close. None had been seriously hurt, but a few had nasty cuts that would take time to heal.

The migrating gulls finally flew off. They followed a different pattern from previous years, as they flew further inland than before. They were searching for food caches that they could grab as they continued their journey. Even though they had just fed, their minds were forever focused on their next meal. Gotta eat.



Dr. Alice Friedman, the Deputy Director for Preparedness and Emerging Infections at the Center for Disease Control, was packing up her office at Saddleback Memorial Health Center. This had been ground zero during the bird attacks and had housed dozens of CDC employees and medical personnel from all over Orange County, California.

The facility had been pushed to its maximum during the previous weeks. It finally was returning to its usual activities. Now the rabies victims only occupied one small wing of the center and a handful of beds. These patients were made as comfortable as possible, but their prognosis was not good.

Dr. Friedman had sent almost all the CDC employees from Atlanta back home and was at long last happy to be returning, herself. Southern California was beautiful, but this had hardly been a vacation. She was anxious to get home to her own home and family.

Almost immediately after the die-off of the birds, she let Dr. Grant Abernathy, who headed up Animal Resources – Biologics branch, fly back to Atlanta with the stipulation that he would be on the first plane back if anything about this case resurfaced.

Dr. Anna Lanz with the CDC was the first to hear about this disease. She would be staying a while longer and monitoring the remaining patients. She was enjoying her stay in Southern California since the epidemic had died out with the birds, and was single, anyway.

She entered Dr. Friedman's office and asked, "All packed?"

Dr. Friedman looked up, "Almost. As usual, I have more paperwork than luggage to bring back with me. I even planned a long stay with lots of clothes," she said shaking her head.

"Our agency loves nothing more than their paper," laughed Dr. Lanz. "Even with all the computer files and ease of access to that, they still demand their paper

trail."

Dr. Friedman looked at the stack of boxes and shrugged, "I guess they are worried we may have an EMP meltdown, or worse."

She then looked squarely at Dr. Lanz, "Now, you will keep me posted if the least little thing happens, right? I don't care how insignificant you think it may be. We were lucky this time. I can't believe how close we all came to a major national pandemic. If those birds hadn't died off and instead flown to other areas..."

Dr. Lanz said, "You have my promise. Nothing will take place without you immediately hearing it from me."

Dr. Friedman shook Dr. Lanz's hand and then signaled for the others waiting to take all her possessions to the car heading to the airport.



Even before the attack on the San Clemente Pier, something happened that no one would have considered. The first vulture that had contracted the SARV disease had succumbed to its effects, and like the others that would follow, had fallen dead.

It happened in a field outside of town and was not witnessed. Because of the other vultures that took part in the attacks, no one would have thought that one of their numbers was missing. There were just too many birds involved to consider that one or two might have died earlier.

At first, the corpse wasn't noticed. But, as the smell of decay began to increase, others picked up the scent.

The first was two turkey vultures in the vicinity that had not been previously infected. They picked at the corpse first. Soon after a coyote ventured by, followed by a couple raccoons, all of which made short work of the body.

It wasn't long before the remains had disappeared completely. The animals and birds carried something of the vulture away with them. Something none of them would have wanted.

Within a few days, the coyote had limited its foraging only to the night. The sun was too bright and hurt its eyes and head too much to hunt during the day. While it was always hungry and thirsty, the idea of drinking water was loathing to him because his throat hurt so badly.

Food was all the coyote craved. It was always particularly adept at hunting, but now it was continuously foraging for anything that moved or was already dead. Its belly was extended from all the meals it had consumed. Killing the animals now gave it as much pleasure as eating them.

The coyote hated anything and everything.

The same happened with the raccoons. They already did the majority of their foraging at night. But now they were always ready to eat anything they came across, day or night. They already knew where they could find a steady source of food, as they had robbed from people in the past. So they made their way to the trash cans of the nearby residents, and with each passing day, they became bolder and less frightened of the neighborhood dogs, cats, and people.



In fact, they hoped something would get in their path so they could attack it, kill it, and eat it.

Although there were very few vultures in the area now, the two newly infected vultures began to extend their range much farther than ever before. They were combing far and wide to locate any remains that might help satisfy their appetite. They had not joined up with the other birds who were wreaking havoc in San Clemente as they acquired their unending appetite after the die-off.

As they continued their foraging, they left their roosting areas and headed to new regions around the Southland and extended their circle further north. Riding the thermals, they headed toward Dana Point.



At the top of the twenty-story Park Place Tower in Irvine, a successful mother was raising her fourth set of chicks. Over the last few years, she had fledged five out of seven nestlings and was about to add two more to her count. Her efforts, along with that of her mate, added several thriving Peregrine Falcons to the population of Southern California.

While the birds before her were within mere days of taking wing, she and her mate were still providing all the food they had to have. This was the toughest year so far for keeping her brood fed. In previous years, there were many more pigeons and rodents to catch. This year it seemed most of the pigeons had moved elsewhere, and many of the rodents had been killed off from the

overzealous owners of the high rises.

She was having to travel further out to catch the next meal for the family. This left the chicks vulnerable for more extended periods, but there was little choice. It was this or have them starve. Luckily for the mating pair, they were almost at the end of this season's parenthood.

As she heard her the cries of her mate coming, she knew it was her turn to venture off for the next meal. She hopped up on the railing, unfurled her wings, and took off to feed her family.

The migrating gulls had been following Highway 1 along the coast for most of the time. Now they were moving deeper inland and headed toward more traffic and increased populations. Most of what they saw was neighborhood dogs and a few animals that were too fast for them to catch. Once away from the water, they needed to scavenge more than hunt for fish.

The gulls had now come up to the I-5 freeway and were deep into the residential areas. They were still scouring the area looking for roadkill or a garbage dump. They knew by instinct and from their previous forays that landfills and dump sites were virtual buffets of food. Their insatiable appetites drove them on.

Most of the time these treasure troves were loaded with other birds. This was never a problem as there was plenty to go around, and it also made the landfills easy to spot from the air. They were focused on the ground below them when it happened.

One of the gulls that had opened its wings to glide for a bit, suddenly felt the searing pain of the talons cut through its back and right side. It let out a terrible

shriek, but it was too late. The falcon was already maneuvering its catch back toward the nest. The other gulls picked up the pace of their flight in case the bird's mate or other threat was lurking nearby.

While the peregrine hardly looked big enough to attack the larger bird, its strength and experience more than compensated for the size of its prey. The gull was dead by the time the falcon reached the tower, the talons and an occasional beak thrust having done its work.

This was a feast for the family, and soon all four birds were throwing feathers in every direction. The mother had once again assured the survival of her two new chicks and the propagation of her species.