

## State's drought having pronounced effect on wildlife

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Scrawny and covered with insects, a California mule deer fawn lies in parched grass after looking for food in Descanso Canyon on Santa Catalina Island. The ongoing drought has hit the state's wildlife hard. (Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

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Baby squirrels in Northern California are so hungry they are jumping out of their nests to search for food. Food sources for wildlife have been diminished by California's prolonged drought. The Gold Country Wildlife Rescue in Loomis, Calif., has been swamped with orphaned squirrels.

Starving baby squirrels in parts of Northern California are so hungry that they are jumping out of their nests to search for food and getting lost on the way home.

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The increase in suddenly motherless squirrels is just one example of how the state's prolonged drought has affected wildlife, experts say.

If the drought continues, we expect next year to be much worse. Fewer babies will make it through to adulthood as sources of food become scarce. - Jackie Nott, spokeswoman for Gold Country Wildlife Rescue in Loomis, Calif.

This year, the Gold Country Wildlife Rescue in Loomis has been swamped with orphaned squirrels. The nonprofit volunteer organization saw the number of baby squirrels it took in rise from 1,800 in 2013 to more than 2,200 this

year, spokeswoman Jackie Nott said.

"If the drought continues, we expect next year to be much worse," she said. "Fewer babies will make it through to adulthood as sources of food become scarce."

Baby squirrels are just one of many animals fleeing their homes and risking their lives to search for food sources that have been diminished by drought.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife officials said drought has forced more bears and deer to venture onto mountain highways, where many are struck and killed by vehicles.

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Just in the last week, said Malcolm Dougherty, director of the California Department of Transportation, there were an "unprecedented" 23 collisions between wildlife and drivers on California 50 and Interstate 80 in Northern California.

Recent wildfires, which have destroyed a significant amount of vegetation, have also forced wildlife to travel farther than usual for food.

According to the California Roadkill Observation System, more deer were killed in 2014 than last year. Drought was probably to blame for the increase in deaths among deer, which were forced to travel farther in search of food, said Fraser Shilling, co-director of the Road Ecology Center.

Still, officials say there is no easy way to divert wildlife away from busy highways.

"You can't really change wildlife behavior," said Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Dana Michaels. "We have to hope people are more intelligent than the animals."

To reduce the number of animal-involved collisions, wildlife and transportation officials are reminding motorists to watch out for wildlife, and to heed electronic messaging and signs posted along highways.

Though major storms have brought much-needed rainfall to the state this fall and early winter, especially in Northern California, meteorologists warn that there is no guarantee that they will continue — noting that in 2010 areas such as Southern California saw massive rainfall in December, only to revert to drought conditions almost immediately afterward.

"If the drought persists, there will be catastrophic consequences for all kinds of species — especially those dependent on water, like amphibians," Nott said. "It is very likely there will be pockets of local extinction for these animals."

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