



Managing Oil Impacts on Birds



Oiled gannet before capture (NPS/Warren Bielenberg). Cleaning an oiled pelican and a gannet at Theodore Oiled Wildlife Rehabilitation Center (U.S. Coast Guard photos by Petty Officer 3rd Class Colin White).

Finding oiled birds

Many people want to help when they see the birds that have been impacted by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. While this instinct is positive, the involvement of untrained people can actually do more harm than good. Untrained people can injure birds that they are trying to rescue or even harm themselves doing so. Rescuing, treating, and cleaning birds require proper facilities, equipment, and trained staff. Oiled animals should be approached, handled, treated, and cleaned by individuals with proper training and access to facilities. So what can you do to help?

What should I do if I see a visibly oiled bird?

If you see or find a bird affected by the oil, please call the Wildlife Reporting Hotline at 866-557-1401. A dispatcher is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When calling, please include the location of the distressed wildlife, including geographic information with nearby physical landmarks such as a marina, condominium, or beach name, and GPS coordinates if possible. The reporting party's contact information and originating zip code will also be requested. All calls are returned to the reporting party to confirm that the information has been received and to assure prompt follow-up action will take place.

Once a call is received and it is determined to be within the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response area, a wildlife response team is notified. A team equipped with appropriate personal protective

equipment (PPE) is dispatched from staging areas that are based on the location of the animal, the previous day's response activities, and anticipated movement of oil. Given the dynamic nature of the situation, the weather, and the location of the distressed animal, response time can vary.

Once the bird is located by the response team, it is placed carefully in an animal carrier or kennel-type container. The bird is then taken to one of four area rehabilitation centers staffed by employees of the Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research Center, the International Bird Rescue Research Center, and other paraprofessionals and volunteers, all of whom are trained in wildlife rehabilitation. The rehabilitation centers are located in Ft. Jackson, Louisiana; Gulfport, Mississippi; Theodore, Alabama; and Pensacola, Florida.

What are the effects of oil on birds?

Even a small amount of oil can kill a bird. When a bird gets oiled, the oil sticks to its feathers, causing them to mat and separate. This affects the bird's waterproofing capabilities, and the bird cannot stay afloat or regulate its temperature. Instinctively,

the bird tries to get the oil off its feathers by cleaning itself (preening) and may ingest oil when doing so. This can cause severe damage to the bird's internal organs. Since the bird's natural instinct is to focus on preening, that behavior overrides all

other natural behaviors such as feeding and evading predators. This causes the bird to be vulnerable to such things as severe weight loss, anemia, and dehydration. Many oil-soaked birds lose their buoyancy and cannot swim, so they beach them-

selves in their attempt to escape the cold water and may hide on shore. These vulnerable birds panic when approached and can become injured when trying to flee humans.

How is an oiled bird cleaned?

Upon arrival at an oiled wildlife rehabilitation center, oil-contaminated birds receive the specialized treatment they need to get back on the road to recovery. Each bird is examined, provided with life-saving IV and oral fluids, and fitted with a temporary leg band so its progress can be monitored throughout the rehabilitation process. It is critical that the debilitated bird is medically stabilized prior to undergoing washing and examined by a wildlife veterinarian experienced in treating oiled wildlife. A small blood sample is used to evaluate the bird's status to ensure it is strong enough to be washed. Teams of experienced oiled wildlife responders wash the birds in tubs of very warm water and a mild detergent.

Once the soap is rinsed from the bird's feathers, the bird is placed in a specialized drying pen to allow it a chance to preen as it dries.

Cleaned birds are generally moved into outdoor aviaries equipped with pools to allow the birds an opportunity to preen, swim, and exercise. The birds are monitored closely to make sure the stress of captivity is minimized as well as to ensure that their health continues to improve. In accordance with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) protocols, prior to release the bird's behavior, body weight, blood values, and waterproofing are evaluated.

What happens after the bird is cleaned?

A rehabilitated bird is released to an area that has been approved by state and federal wildlife conservation agencies and where the risk of becoming re-oiled has been minimized. Before release, the bird is fitted with a numbered USFWS stainless steel leg band to allow identification if the bird is recaptured or recovered in the future. Releases are usually made early in the day and during fair weather so the bird can adjust to its natural habitat during daylight hours.

Previous oiled bird rehabilitation efforts indicate that rehabilitated birds released into suitable habitat can successfully return to the wild. The USFWS and partner agencies have determined

suitable, non-oiled habitat for released birds currently exists on the Gulf Coast of Texas and are exploring additional options as conditions allow.

This important work is only accomplished through collaboration, cooperation, and partnerships that create a seamless sequence: first, a private citizen makes the initial call about a distressed animal; second, rescue teams and rehabilitators respond and rehabilitate the wildlife; and third, federal agencies and their partners return the bird to the wild. Often it is the U.S. Coast Guard, accompanied by a veterinarian, that transports the rehabilitated wildlife to the release site.

How successful are the clean up efforts for oiled birds?

Through careful evaluation of each bird during the rehabilitation process, every effort is made to reduce the effects of oil on birds. Strict release criteria are in place to ensure that birds released back into the wild will survive. Due to the migratory nature of most bird species potentially impacted by the spill and the limitations of moni-

toring technology for such light-weight flighted creatures, it is difficult to monitor individual birds after release. Bird conservation partners are developing specialized plans to conduct post-release studies to help determine the survival rate of oiled birds following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill incident.

Where can I get more information?

Learn more about the oil spill response at:

www.nps.gov/aboutus/oil-spill-response.htm
www.restorethegulf.gov
www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com
www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill



Pelican release (U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Nick Ameen)