

Oil slick threatens birds and marine animals

May 2 2010, by Mira Oberman



Workers load oil booms onto a boat as the effort continues to try and contain the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Most of the birds and marine animals which get caught by what is expected to be the worst oil spill in US history will die in a matter of days or even hours.

Its long, brown neck held firmly in a blue towel, the northern gannet struggled for freedom, unaware of how very lucky it is to have been found swimming in a sea of oil off the Louisiana coast.

Most of the birds and [marine animals](#) which get caught by what is expected to be the worst oil spill in US history will die in a matter of days or even hours.

Once the sticky oil and tar coats their fur or feathers they lose any insulation against the wet, wind and sun. If they swallow or inhale the

crude oil, it'll eat away at their insides.

Jay Holcomb is one of a handful of specialists who have set up a triage center in Fort Jackson, Louisiana to clean and treat rescued birds.

The director of International [Bird Rescue](#) Research Center, he spent six months in Alaska treating birds oiled in the Exxon Valdez disaster.

About 1,600 were rescued. At least 500,000 died.

He's hoping it won't be that bad this time. It could, in fact, be much worse.

Nobody knows when the oil will stop gushing from a deep water well cracked open after an explosion sank an offshore oil platform run by British Petroleum on April 22.

The massive slick has spread to 3,500 square miles (9,000 square kilometers) - about the size of Puerto Rico - and an estimated 200,000 gallons are leaking into the [Gulf of Mexico](#) every day.

The coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida are threatened and the first wave of oil is expected to inundate the fragile wetlands south of New Orleans.

High tides and high winds can push the oil deep into the marshes, which are accessible only by boat and offer few footholds for rescue workers and plenty of places for the frightened animals to hide.

Most of the birds are currently nesting on the shore, Holcomb said, which makes them more susceptible to the spill and makes it even harder to try to recover oiled birds.

"We've had times when we've had to leave oiled birds because it would kill more birds to get them," Holcomb told reporters touring the triage center.

The brown northern gannet is the first oiled animal to be discovered, but will surely not be the last.

He was rescued on Friday by crews surveying the spill out in the Gulf after they spotted the large seabird approaching their boat and tried to snare him with a fishing gaff.

"He kind of jumped onto the gaffe and they were able to haul him in," said Rebecca Dunne, senior coordinator for Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research, which is also assisting with the rescue efforts.

Once at the center, he was hydrated and force-fed Pepto-Bismol to help protect his stomach from any ingested oil and allowed to rest overnight.

The team plucked seven feathers from the bird before they found the right method to get rid of the oil. They spent 36 minutes washing him carefully with Dawn dish soap on Saturday morning.

It takes four people and up to 300 gallons of water to clean an oiled bird and the center has the capacity to treat and hold a few hundred.

They are usually able to be released after about ten days, but with oil still threatening their habitat it's unclear when and where that can happen.

More than 275,000 feet of boom barriers have been placed to protect three of the most sensitive wildlife refuges which are home to about 34,000 birds.

But vast stretches of sensitive coastal areas remain utterly unprotected

and it's unclear how well the booms hold up against the high winds and rough seas, said Tom MacKenzie, a spokesman for US Fish and Wildlife Service.

"I've done [oil spills](#) before but they're normally a one-time event where they start and they stop," MacKenzie told AFP.

"In this case it's not over. It's not stopped. It's very difficult for us to say when is this going to finish."

Even once the oil leak is capped, the cleanup will be "backbreaking" and will take a very long time, he said.

"This marsh is difficult even to walk through, almost impossible," he said. "Generally you have to go through and literally sop it up by hand with large absorbent materials that are like thick rolls of toilet paper."

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