

Birds frozen in oil: image of a desperate summer

June 5 2010, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer



A bird is mired in oil on the beach at East Grand Terre Island along the Louisiana coast on Thursday, June 3, 2010. Oil from the Deepwater Horizon has affected wildlife throughout the Gulf of Mexico. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

(AP) -- They are the ghastly images of a summer fouled before it started. Squawking seagulls and majestic brown pelicans coated in oil. Click. Gunk dripping from their beaks. Click. Big eyes wide open. Click. Even the professionals want to turn away. They can't.

"They get me. It's just inherently sad," said Nils Warnock, a wildlife recovery specialist. "You see this bird totally covered in [oil](#) and all you can see are those eyes looking at you blinking. You'd have to be pretty tough not to be affected by that image."

Warnock didn't see the birds in person. He's in California, but the

pictures still hit him in the gut. Warnock has been rescuing birds in oil slicks since 1985 and he still chokes up when talking about photos of birds he hasn't seen in person.

Now put yourself in Melanie Driscoll's shoes. She doesn't just see the pictures. She sees the birds close-up through her bird conservation work for the National Audubon Society across Louisiana. The pleading eyes get her, too.

Driscoll has to shut down her emotions while helping coordinate the rescue of the birds. But the feelings sneak back at night, keeping her awake, making her see oily blackness creeping across her cats and even across the moon when she looks up.

When environmental groups try to tug at the public's heart and wallet, they focus on what biologists call "charismatic megafauna." It's the feathered or furry helpless critter that you can relate to. It's not the oiled hermit crab - an image joked about as not very touching by Jon Stewart on "The Daily Show" Thursday night.

It's got to have eyes that melt your heart. And that's what's all over the nation's front pages now.

"The pelican has really become the poster child for this that people are really focusing on," Driscoll said. "The bird is the symbol. They are visible. They are charismatic."

Up in Alaska, where it has been 21 years since the [Exxon Valdez spill](#), residents watching the images of oiled birds are turning off their TV sets because it is just too hard to see, said Nancy Bird. She is director of the Prince William Sound Science Center, which still monitors the effects of the 1989 spill.

"I just wish that somebody would put them out of their misery very quickly," she said. "Watching an animal like that die a slow death is pretty disturbing."

The birds seem frozen in oil. The image is apt.

Birds that get oiled can die from being too cold, or too hot, because the crude oil interferes with the natural oils that make them waterproof. That means their sensitive skin is exposed to extremes in temperature. Even in the relatively mild Gulf waters, they can "die from hypothermia," said Ken Rosenberg, director of conservation science at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. They can also drown.

The brown pelican, the state symbol of Louisiana, is now also the symbol of death - not just for the birds in the pictures, but for the likely thousands unseen.

"If you're seeing oiled birds, we can assume that there's a lot of death going on," Rosenberg said. "They literally are an indicator of what's going on in the entire ecosystem."

Some species of birds, especially those that lurk hidden in marshes - such as the clapper rail, seaside sparrow and mottled duck - will not be photographed coated with oil. They'll just disappear sight unseen, Driscoll said.

"Those [birds](#) won't get their eulogy," Driscoll said. "They'll just disappear. It's an unseen tragedy."

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