

# Gulf Oil Spill Could Affect Maine Bird Populations

July 20 2010

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Even though the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico isn't likely to directly affect Maine coastal habitats and wildlife, it likely will affect some of the birds that are iconic in Maine, including the common loon, many of the state's shore birds and some of its tern species.

It will be some time before we can really measure the effects as we try to track numbers of [birds](#) passing through or coming back to breed, but it will have long-term effects to many of the Maine birds that winter in or pass through the Gulf of Mexico, says Rebecca Holberton, associate professor of biology.

“The immediate impacts, of course, are what you see,” she says. “The [oiled birds](#), the loss of immediate habitat for nesting and resting... It also burns the skin, it's toxic, it's ingested. Birds immediately start to preen and try to remove that oil to regain their buoyancy.”

Though birds can be brought in and washed to get the oil off them, have their stomachs flushed, and fed Pepto Bismol or something similar to help coat the stomach and neutralize the toxins, it's a matter of waiting, she says. “You try to give them safe haven, a safe place to keep warm and to feed them, but many times their organs shut down; it's too late,” she says.

“If you could clean everything up and get the Gulf coastline looking back to snuff this fall, it would be a blip, because the effects on the food base for many species will be long-term. Many of the species affected are

long-lived and it's part of their natural history to produce over a longer period of time," Holberton says. "So, even after the coastlines are cleared of oil, 'our' birds may not find enough food to enable them to survive the winter or to make it to their wintering destinations in order to return back here to breed."

Because the oil contamination will have long-term effects, Holberton is concerned about what might happen to populations that cannot withstand more than a year or two without some reproduction. If the situation threatens the survival of the adults, it likely will threaten future generations of offspring.

"These birds, as a normal part of their life history, span the globe," Holberton says. "In terms of the [Gulf of Mexico](#), it will really hit at the heart of the critical period of life history for many of the species that either come and breed here or pass through the region."

Provided by University of Maine

Citation: Gulf Oil Spill Could Affect Maine Bird Populations (2010, July 20) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-gulf-oil-affect-maine-bird.html>

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