

Arctic-breeding birds will be among next victims of the Gulf oil disaster

Title

For the next six months, beginning in early July, tens of millions of shorebirds, waterfowl and other migratory birds will land on oiled beaches, in sullied coastal wetlands and on tainted ocean waters. For some, the Gulf marks a rest stop, an opportunity to take a break and feed en route to more southern destinations; for others it will serve as home until next spring.

But after flying hundreds or thousands of miles from nesting sites in the northern U.S., Canada, and the Arctic, many will soon face a far more perilous Gulf, where oil continues to spread uncontrolled and could contaminate new areas at any time. “The Gulf of Mexico is like Grand Central Station for the birds of the Eastern United States and especially the Mississippi Flyway,” said Audubon President Frank Gill. A substantial share of the birds that nest somewhere in the US or Canada pass through the Gulf during spring and fall migration and depend on healthy habitat to complete their journeys.

“The impact of the Gulf disaster on migrating birds will be like a train derailment during rush hour,” added Gill. “Not only will it affect the entire system, but its repercussions will be long-lasting. Enabling healthy bird populations to withstand the months and years before the Gulf is clean will require both a continuing emergency response and investments in long-term recovery.”

What birds are at risk? Ocean birds, shorebirds, waterbirds, and waterfowl that rely on saltwater habitat are at highest risk. Semipalmated Sandpipers, an Audubon Watchlist species, and Pectoral Sandpipers will be among the first to arrive, early in July. Both breed on tundra in the northernmost reaches of Canada and Alaska, and travel to Central and South America for the winter. Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and other sandpipers are also early migrants. Some will complete their journeys in the Gulf; others will continue to wintering grounds further south, but all face potential peril from the spill. Its effects will be felt by multiple generations - adult birds typically arrive first, and are followed by first-year chicks that hatched and fledged on northern nesting grounds. Sadly, as these shorebirds feed on mudflats, they will encounter oil – and will both ingest it through their food and get it on their feathers. Unless they are captured, cleaned and relocated, many will die.

Birds that spend the largest part of their life cycle in the Gulf will face even greater peril.

These include many species that are well-known in migratory stopping points or in breeding

grounds further north. Among them are the Common Loon, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Red Knot, Sanderling, Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Western Sandpiper, and Long-billed Dowitcher. As fall migration continues into November and December, waterfowl like Mallards and Snow Geese will also arrive in the Gulf.

What can be done? “One of the most important things we can do is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the spill’s impacts on birds and their habitat to form the foundation for full recovery plans,” according to Greg Butcher, Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon. Currently, Audubon’s Coastal Bird Survey is training and deploying volunteers throughout the Gulf states to monitor bird populations and habitat conditions. The effort will be ongoing. “In addition,” Butcher says, “this year’s Christmas Bird Count will be more important than ever, giving us an early warning about what species may be in trouble as a result of the spill.”

There is some good news as bird rescue and release efforts continue. Migrating and wintering birds can generally be more successfully relocated than those that are breeding or newly hatched in the affected areas. Gulf region Audubon Important Bird Areas in Texas and Florida that have not been hit by the spill are already providing refuge for cleaned birds and will become even more important with the return of fall migrants. However, wildlife rescue workers will need to continue to balance concern about individual birds with potential risk to larger populations; disturbing birds can too easily drive them into greater contact with oil. Audubon volunteers will play a continuing role in supporting rescue efforts.

Meanwhile, Federal and State wildlife and agricultural agencies are working with other conservationists to provide clean habitat for waterfowl by flooding agricultural fields. In some cases, it may also be appropriate to deter birds from landing on heavily oiled beaches and marshes, for example by covering areas with plastic or other material. Unfortunately, the scope of the spill, and the fact that much of the oil is on the ocean surface where birds dive to feed renders this measure impractical on a large scale.