

Concerns grow for the IBAs, wildlife and gulf coast habitat

Title

While immediate impacts on birds have not yet been as dramatic as many had at first feared, Audubon is gravely concerned about the ultimate toll that this unprecedented environmental crisis will have on birds, other wildlife and gulf coast habitat: 1) Audubon are concerned that the oil is already wreaking havoc with the underwater marine ecosystem in the gulf.

Although the issue is not currently receiving adequate attention and study, it is virtually certain that fish, shrimp, and many other vital cogs in the web of life are dying underwater, unseen. The loss of these critical sources of food has potentially devastating consequences for both birds and the coastal economy that depends on them.

Comprehensive assessment and documentation of the spill's impacts on marine life is essential to support both the emergency response and ongoing recovery of the Gulf coast ecosystem – and it needs to be an immediate priority.

2) The birds that dive into open water for food – Brown Pelicans, terns (Least, Forster's, Sandwich, Royal, Caspian), Magnificent Frigatebird, Northern Gannet, and other pelagic species – will be the first to encounter food losses due to oiling and to become oiled themselves as they dive into the open waters. Not surprisingly, the first oiled birds we have seen are primarily these species. Further, many of these species may die or become ill without being discovered by humans.

3) Audubon expect that as oil continues to spew into the gulf, it is only a question of time before it comes onshore. At best, it will come gradually – at worst, storms and oceanic conditions will drive it ashore more dramatically. The more oil there is in the gulf, the more destructive it will be when storm-driven onto shore.

4) Under a storm-driven siege, the booms now in place will lose much of their effectiveness, leaving millions of birds vulnerable to oil washing onto nesting islands, beaches, sand flats and mudflats, and seeping into wetlands, and coastal terrestrial habitats. Contact with oil can have disastrous effects on seabirds and shorebirds, weakening them slowly or killing them outright.

Melanie Driscoll, Audubon's director of bird conservation in Louisiana, reports: "So far (12 May), very few oiled birds have been found and brought in. All the agencies and organizations involved are using this time – before there are lots of birds – to get structures and processes in place to deal with a much larger response when and if it becomes necessary." So Melanie

has met this week with staff from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the Louisiana State Animal Response Team and Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research to discuss rescue and care efforts for birds that come into contact with oil.