Galveston Bay oil spill imperils thousands of birds

Title
Texas City, in the United States was the site of a massive oil spill on Saturday, an industrial accident with dire consequences for birds and wildlife throughout Galveston Bay.

The spill, the result of a collision between a ship and a barge, unleashed nearly 170,000 gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Though the volume of spill is low compared to the 210 million gallons that leaked into the gulf during the Deepwater Horizon Spill four years ago, the spill is nonetheless a serious environmental crisis.

“Part of the reason that this was a significant spill was not because of the amount of oil, but because of the proximity that it has to natural habitat and globally important wildlife sanctuaries,” says Richard Gibbons, Conservation Director for Houston Audubon Society. “There are over 1,000 acres of sanctuary nearby.”

Most of that land is contained by Bolivar Flats, a Globally Significant Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, which hosts 50,000 to 70,000 shore and waterbirds each migration season. The timing of the spill is especially unfortunate: Spring migration is already well underway, as is breeding season for colonial species. Ten bird species are especially vulnerable to the oil slick: Piping Plovers, Brown Pelicans, Black Skimmers, American Oystercatchers, Reddish Egrets, Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, and Wilson’s Plovers all winter at the flats.

Remediation is already on the minds of responders at Galveston Bay, who note several factors that might make habitat recovery a tricky enterprise.

For one, the oil itself is tar oil, a dirtier, stickier variety that does not disperse as easily regular crude. And the mudflats of Bolivar Flats can’t be cleaned with a simple scrubbing. “They’re not like rocky beaches, which you can spray clean,” says Peña of Audubon Texas.

For now, the hope is that the oil remains in the Gulf waters long enough to clump for easier removal. And patrols of the sanctuaries at both Bolivar Flats and North Deer Island will continue until the slick is contained.