



Oil Spill Answers from Expert on the Ground

Title

Yesterday, workers picked up an oil-covered northern gannet, the first bird rescued from the BP oil spill. It was taken to a treatment facility in Venice, Louisiana, where the oil slick has begun washing up on shore. Audubon's (BirdLife Partner in the US) Melanie Driscoll, director of bird conservation for the Louisiana Coastal Initiative, is in Venice to help coordinate bird rescue efforts. Driscoll set aside some time yesterday evening to talk about the challenges facing bird rescue workers, the search for volunteers, the species of greatest concern, and the beauty and rich birdlife of the region.

Several miles out in the Gulf, there are patches of thick oil. Are you seeing oil? I just got information from a crew that there is a trace of oil sheen starting to reach barrier islands, but it's coming slowly. We're not coated in oil right now. It looks very much like the initial big boom of oil hitting shore is a trickle, and right now everything is very quiet.

What makes the area so special? The barrier islands of the Chandeleur Island chain are a globally important bird area and so is the "bird's foot" delta, so we have congregations of birds, including beach-nesting and colonial birds like Wilson's plover, snowy plover, brown pelicans, and reddish egrets. There are also marsh birds we're concerned about, like clapper rails, seaside sparrows, and then in other parts of the coast black rails, least terns. We're concerned about the impact on the habitats as well as the populations themselves.

Looking around, what do you see? This is one of the most wonderful places to be, and this is one of the most wonderful times of year to be here. Brown pelicans are on nests, on eggs, getting ready to produce young. I had magnificent frigatebirds fly over my head while I was driving down today, a clapper rail ran across the road with a crustacean in its bill. There are many, many birds here of many different species. They're pair bonding, they're flirting with each other, they're building nests and making young. I'm watching a green heron fly over and laughing gulls are calling. It's also shorebird and neo-tropical migrant migration right now. So there are just millions of birds around, and it's a beautiful, rich place with a lot of value, both for bird species and for fisheries that provide a lot of food that we like to eat.

There are so many islands and marshes. What impact will the geography have on wildlife rescue efforts? The conditions will be difficult to rescue birds. Crews have been putting out booms to try to keep the oil out of areas, and today it was too rough today for them to operate the boats and get the booms in place. It just wasn't safe. So strong winds and weather can impact wildlife rescue. Trained professionals are the ones who will go out to get the birds—they'll have to take boats out through potentially rough waters to barrier islands to

pick up any birds that area oiled. And in the marshes it can be hard to find birds.

On our blog and Facebook page people have said they'd like to help. You're organising volunteers—how can citizens get involved? It's important for people who want to help to make themselves available, but not to expect to be called immediately. We're helping to gather a core of volunteers we can call on. We're helping to create a database of volunteers and then helping volunteers get the training they need so we have a skilled volunteer labour force for the long-term, if we need it. We don't really know yet how big it will be or how long it will last.

For anyone who's down here along the coast, if you see an oiled bird, do not touch it. Call the appropriate number (1-866-557-1401) and report the location. These birds are very stressed, and the best way to help if you find one is to inform the people who are trained to handle them. Report birds, but don't pick them up.

In addition to organising volunteers, what are you working on? We are working to try to monitor the situation, and, using information we have about birds, direct protection efforts to areas that are important for birds as much as we can. Audubon is also planning for long-term monitoring, to see how this impacts populations now and how those populations may respond in the future as we can help get things cleaned up and start to really work again on our habitat restoration.

And then in the very long timeframe, we have the Mississippi River Initiative. Through that we're trying to help the ecology and management of the whole Mississippi River flood plain in a way that is contributing more to coastal restoration. We're in a unique position here that we have a powerful river with a lot of sediment. We can actually create habitat with the right types of management, and that's rare. We have a lot of opportunity, and we need to be working and poised to take advantage of that.

To read the latest news about the Gulf Oil Spill, visit [Audubon's website](#) or see the latest within the [BirdLife Community](#). Credit: Alisa Opar / Audubonmagazine.org