New Zealand oil clean up needs to focus on wildlife

Title
No effort should be spared to clean up the oil and debris from the Rena as the toll on wildlife continues to rise, Forest & Bird (BirdLife in New Zealand) said last Tuesday. An estimated 20,000 birds were killed by the oil spill from the wreck of the Rena off the Bay of Plenty coast in October last year and more birds are being killed and harmed since the wreck broke up on January 8. “We are deeply concerned about the effects on shorebirds, seabirds, and other marine life as oil and debris spread from the wreck,” Forest & Bird Central North Island Field Officer Al Fleming said.

“It is vital we continue working hard to clean up the Bay of Plenty coast and seas to minimise the damage to wildlife and the environment.” At least 60 dead oiled birds have been collected since the beginning of last week. Overseas research suggests only around 10 per cent of all birds killed in an oil spill are recovered, with most sinking without trace at sea. Around a dozen oiled little blue penguins have been recovered for treatment in the last week, as well as three grey-faced petrels and one New Zealand dotterel.

They are being cared for at the Oiled Wildlife Response Centre in Mt Maunganui or at Massey University in Palmerston North. Al Fleming said there are also concerns about the impact on wildlife of debris, particularly the translucent plastic beads that spilled from the Rena’s cargo. One bird recovering at the response centre has been seen vomiting plastic beads and birds on the beach have been spotted feeding on the beads. “Shorebirds such as the threatened New Zealand dotterels feed on sand hoppers and fish eggs, which are also translucent and a similar size to the beads. Floating beads float also pose a threat to seabirds feeding on the water,” he said. “A number of dead birds have been found on the beaches that have not been oiled. Autopsies will confirm whether they have eaten debris or died from other causes.”

A large number of juvenile shorebirds and seabirds are in the Bay of Plenty area at the moment and they are more likely to eat debris because the young typically learn feeding habits through trial and error. Other potential threats to wildlife from debris include damage to nests, entanglement and a build-up of toxins. Forest & Bird last year launched a Save our Shorebirds project in the Bay of Plenty following funding cuts to the Department of Conservation. Save our Shorebirds focuses on pest control, education and improving habitats for shorebirds, and will now also work on trying to minimise the continuing impact of the Rena disaster.

Forest & Bird is raising funds for Save our Shorebirds through our website and telemarketers. More information about the project and making a donation can be found on the Forest & Bird

website at **http://tinyurl.com/82lws27**. Forest & Bird is calling for a full inquiry into the Rena grounding to ensure the lessons are learned following New Zealand's worst ever maritime environmental disaster.

Authorities were unable to prevent a devastating oil spill following the grounding of a ship close to New Zealand's busiest port. We need to do more to prevent shipping accidents and to respond more effectively. Any spill resulting from deep sea oil and gas exploration or production would lead to a much worse environmental tragedy. Forest & Bird believes there should be a moratorium on deep sea drilling until the results of an inquiry into the Rena disaster are known and the recommendations adopted.

Subscribe to The BirdLife Pacific Quarterly E-Newsletter