

Oil Spill update from New Zealand

Title

The last two months of 2011 brought some good news for Forest & Bird (BirdLife in New Zealand) in the wake of the country's worst ever maritime environmental disaster in October. By mid-December, most of more than 400 birds – mostly Little Penguins and endangered New Zealand Dotterels – had been released back into the wild after being cared for at an Oiled Wildlife Response Centre. The remaining birds were also expected to be released as they returned to full health and their home beaches were cleared of lingering oil pollution.

Some positive news was needed after a grim October when the Liberian-registered container ship *Rena* ran aground on Astrolabe Reef, close to New Zealand's busiest port of Tauranga on the North Island's east coast. On October 11, nearly a week after the grounding, around 350 tonnes of heavy fuel oil spewed from the ship's cracked hull into the Bay of Plenty. Oil quickly started washing ashore, along with the bodies of sea-birds covered in the thick tar-like fuel. Based on overseas research, the 2,000 bodies eventually recovered are likely to represent about only 10 percent of all the birds killed, most of which would have sunk without trace at sea.

To compound the damage, the oil spill happened during the breeding season for many species, including the Common Diving-petrel, which made up about half of the recovered bodies, and Fluttering Shearwaters, which accounted for about 20%. Staff and members of Forest & Bird were involved in the wildlife recovery and clean up operations in the Bay of Plenty. Hundreds of oiled penguins were found and taken to the hastily erected response centre, along with 60 uninjured New Zealand Dotterels, which were removed from the region's beaches as a precaution. Around only 1700 individuals of the endangered New Zealand dotterel are estimated to remain nationwide, including about 200 in the Bay of Plenty area. Scientists hoped there would be time for the released birds to reform pairs and raise chicks before the end of the breeding season in January.

Despite the devastation, the disaster could have been much worse, with fears the ship could have broken apart before the removal of about 1300 tonnes of fuel remaining on the ship after the initial spill. But the ship held together, the bulk of the oil was recovered, and marine ecologists hope the marine environment will largely recover within months.

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