

Race to save oiled penguins after tanker strikes Tristan da Cunha

Title

A grounded cargo vessel has been wrecked on Nightingale Island ? part of the Tristan da Cunha UK overseas territory in the South Atlantic - and an oil spill now threatens wildlife, including nearly half of the world population of Northern Rockhopper Penguin; classified as Endangered by BirdLife International on the IUCN Red List. Hundreds of oiled penguins have already been seen coming ashore.

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/800-Sean-Burns-1-300x201.jpg>

An oil slick has spread to 8 miles (c. 13 km) offshore (Copyright Sean Burns)

The concerns of the Tristan Islanders, the Tristan Association and the RSPB who work on the islands, are not only are for the oil spill but also the the risk of any rats on the MS Oliva cargo vessel colonising the island?s internationally-important seabird colonies in immense jeopardy. The fuel oil and cargo of 1,500 tonnes of heavy crude oil is already leaking into the sea, Oil now surrounds Nightingale Island and extends in to a slick 8 miles offshore from the wreck. The slick poses a major hazard to the island?s tens of thousands of pairs of penguin as well as the economically-important rock lobster fishery. The Tristan Conservation Department ? which rapidly deployed nine people to the island ? has already placed baited rodent traps on the shore in the vicinity of Spinner?s Point, the headland on the north-west of the island where the bulk carrier has grounded.

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/800-Trevor-Glass-5-300x225.jpg>



Hundreds of oiled penguins have been found. Credit: copyright Trevor Glass.

A salvage tug is currently en-route from Cape Town with an experienced crew and environmental experts but she is not due to arrive at the island until Monday. The ship has already broken in two, but all of the 22-strong crew are safe. As the situation is no longer a salvage operation, the Tristan authorities understand that the vessel's operators and insurers are investigating chartering a second vessel to assist with cleaning up the pollution and oiled seabirds. Richard Cuthbert is an RSPB research biologist who has visited Nightingale Island. He said: "How a modern and fully-laden cargo vessel can sail straight into an island beggars belief. The consequences of this wreck could be potentially disastrous for wildlife and the fishery-based economy of these remote islands. The Tristan da Cunha islands, especially Nightingale and adjacent Middle Island, hold million of nesting seabirds as well as four out of every ten of the world population of the globally endangered Northern Rockhopper Penguin. Over 200,000 penguins are currently on the islands and these birds will be heavily impacted by leaking oil."



More than 40% of Northern Rockhopper Penguins are currently on these islands. Credit: copyright Richard Cuthbert.

"If the vessels happens to be harbouring rats and they get ashore, then a twin environmental catastrophe could arise. Nightingale is one of two large islands in the Tristan da Cunha group that are rodent free. If rats gain a foothold their impact would be devastating. Fortunately, the Tristan da Cunha Conservation Department has already done a brilliant job in placing rodent traps in the vicinity of the wreck, with the hope these will intercept any rats getting ashore." Trevor Glass, the Tristan Conservation Officer, has been working around the clock since the incident occurred early on Wednesday morning. Returning from an emergency assessment visit, he said: "The scene at Nightingale is dreadful as there is an oil slick encircling the island. The Tristan Conservation Team are doing all they can to clean up the penguins that are currently coming ashore. It is a disaster!" For updates please visit the Tristan Association website: <http://www.tristandc.com/newsmsoliva.php>