

Oil Spill 2010

By Carol Kaczmarek

I'm sure that all wildlife rehabilitators are watching with horror the continuing news about the oil disaster off the shore of Louisiana. Each day the news becomes worse as more oil spews out of the downed oil platform, about 200,000 gallons of oil per day. In addition, in spite of the best efforts of many groups, the oil continues to move nearer to land. So far, not much has been written about the various animals that are most affected by this disaster and what can be done to minimize the damage to the lives of these animals. What animals are most in danger from the oil spill? Sadly, this happened at perhaps the worst time for this was at the height of the bird migration.

NESTING AND MIGRATING SHORE BIRDS. Plovers, sandpipers, and oystercatchers are nesting on the ground on the beaches and barrier islands of Louisiana. They feed on invertebrates and are very vulnerable to oil coming ashore. In addition, when this first happened, migrating shore birds were traveling from South America to their nesting areas farther north. This was a vital time as they need to rest and eat in the oil spill areas. This was the busiest time for shore birds and other birds such as raptors that were migrating.

MIGRATING SONGBIRDS. Songbirds (warblers, hummingbirds, swallows, and others) flew 500 miles over open water, across the gulf from the Yucatan to the spill areas. They needed healthy habitats on both sides of the Gulf to survive their journey. This was the height of their migration season also. Besides the need for healthy habitats for food and rest, the smoke from the spill also affected their migration.

BROWN PELICANS. The brown pelican was only removed from the Endangered Species List this past year. There is a major nesting area where about 34,000 pelicans are currently nesting in the Gulf at the Breton National Wildlife Refuge. Diving birds are very susceptible to oil spills because they come into direct contact with the oil. It coats their feathers which may cause them to lose warmth and buoyancy, they may also ingest oil when trying to clean their feathers, and finally they can be poisoned by eating contaminated food.

SEA TURTLES. Of the remaining species of sea turtles, five of them are found in the Gulf. The oil spill area is one of the only foraging grounds left for the most endangered of the group—the KEMP'S RIDLEY TURTLE and they are in the peak of their nesting season. Other sea turtles migrate through the area or feed in the Gulf which can also put them in danger.

WHALES AND DOLPHINS. A total of 21 whales and dolphins species routinely inhabit the northern Gulf. Two other endangered whale species may also be in the area of the spill. The dangers to whales include getting oil in the filtering structure in their mouths which could lead to starvation, and they could get lung injuries from inhaling hydrocarbon vapors. Young whales might ingest oil from nursing on contaminated teats.

MANATEES. Manatees are beginning to spread out along the full range of their summer habitat in the Gulf making them vulnerable to contaminated waters. They may not be as affected directly as some other species, but they're very sensitive to habitat disturbances. They also may eat contaminated plant material. They may be affected by inhaling hydrocarbons when rising to the surface to breathe and infants may become ill by nursing from contaminated teats.

FISH, SHELLFISH, AND CRABS. The delta estuary is a breeding ground for many species of fish, shellfish, and

crabs. They can be affected in a variety of ways including oil being absorbed by eggs, larvae, and juvenile stages. They may also develop defects in their heart, liver, and other organs. Chemicals used as dispersants can increase potential for tainting fish and shellfish. Again, the prime inshore shrimp season begins in mid-May. Coastal waters around the tip of Louisiana are home to many oyster farms. Oils and hydrocarbons are toxic to oysters and they can persist in coastal sediments for months or even years. The spill will create many financial problems for fishermen and those who work with crabs, shrimp, and oysters.

NORTH ATLANTIC BLUEFIN TUNA. Tuna is an especially desirable fish. Overfishing throughout its range has driven their numbers down to an extremely low level. Their stocks have fallen 90% since the 1970s. Tuna return between mid-April to mid-June to spawn in an area very near to the spill. This is where the water is warm and full of nutrients.

GULF STURGEON. Gulf Sturgeon are gathering in Coastal areas preparing to migrate upstream to spawn. Oil reaching their congregating areas could be disastrous for the fish. Heavily fished, they are on the endangered species list. Many problems have caused the decrease of sturgeons and contaminates in the water can cause birth defects.

OTHER ANIMALS. This includes mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and other species. When the oil reaches the shoreline, it can cause problems for local mammals such as raccoons, opossums, squirrels, and other small mammals which can become ill from contaminated food and oil on their fur. Other animals can also be contaminated. The results of this contamination is not really known at this time.

What can we do to help in this disaster?

- Many organizations are looking for help, especially for trained volunteers. Many are accepting applications over the internet.
- Money donations may go to a variety of organizations including the Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation, as well as many local organizations
- Dawn Dishwashing Liquid is offering to donate a dollar to two rescue organizations for each bottle of Dawn purchased (dawn-dish.com/savingwildlife). You must go online to activate the donation.
- You can send a message to President Obama using form letters from the National Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club.
- For up-to-date news, Twitter has a number of sites providing information on the spill.