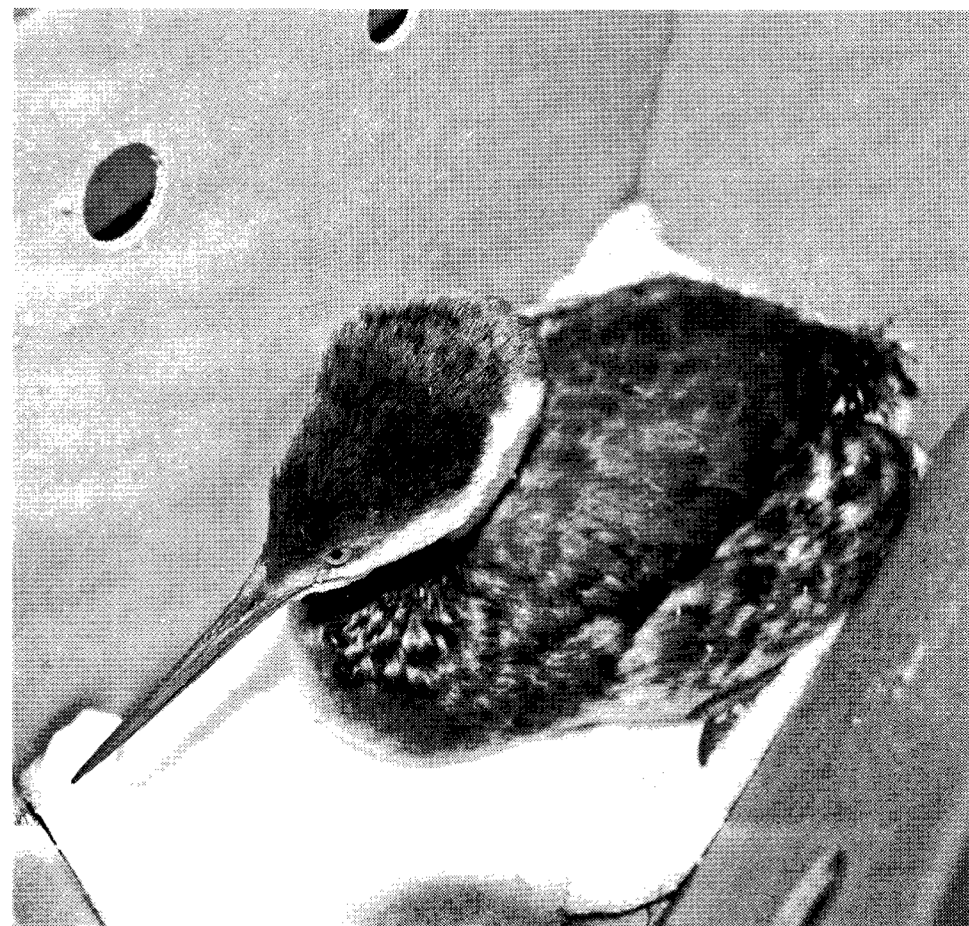


# First release of birds after the oil spill



Ducks and grebes were among the birds treated for oil wings at Wildcare in San Rafael last week. A few dozen were released Monday. Photo by Jacoba Charles.

by Jacoba Charles

A great flutter of wings rose from Heart's Desire beach and sounded over Tomales Bay as 34 birds were released Monday. They were the second flock of oiled birds set free since the Cosco Busan oil spill on October 7.

"The loon went out and started washing itself in the bay and vocalizing," said Tom Rusert, a member of the International Bird Rescue Research Center (IBRRC) release team. "And the ruddy turnstone jumped up on top of its box and posed there. Some of the other birds flew in circles over our heads before landing back in the water. It was a beautiful thing to see."

Contracted workers, non-profit organizations and volunteers have scoured beaches daily since the spill. They have brought over 2,500 living and dead birds to IBRRC's center in Cordelia to either be treated and cleaned, or disposed of.

For each oiled bird that was found, between 10 and 100 more died at sea, said Melanie Piazza, director of animal care at Wildcare, which has served as a triage center for the birds in Marin. She added that the total number of dead birds could be as many as 240,000.

Of that possible number, only 1,050 had made it to the IBRRC facility alive as of Monday night.

Living birds were gathered by nets and gloved hands from the beaches, each placed in a cardboard box on a clean, folded towel. The time and place of origin was written on the box. Dead birds were gath-

ered and labeled as well.

"If the poison doesn't get them from ingesting it while preening, or having it soak through their skin, then hypothermia will," said Piazza.

In West Marin, birds were taken to a staging ground at the Bear Valley visitor center until the Humane Society or other volunteers drove them to Wildcare in San Rafael.

During the past two weeks at Wildcare, a group of workers wearing white Tyvek suits and purple rubber gloves duct-taped at their wrists have bustled through rooms crowded with boxes, cages, heaters and stacks of towels. They handled over 500 oiled birds as of Monday; 320 were already dead and 13 died while at the facility.

"Obviously, the birds are pretty down after a week of living in this sludge," said Piazza. "We hydrate them, keep them warm and see what else they need to be strong enough to make the trip to Cordelia."

Some birds were only at Wildcare for a few hours; others remained as long as two days before they were ready to be moved. One oiled red-tailed hawk from the Marin Headlands was there for five days until a raptor expert was available to transport and clean her at IBRRC, where they are not used to dealing with raptors.

The most common birds brought in were surf scoters, murres and a variety of grebes. Each has a unique personality, from skittish scaups to the Western grebes that make squeaky complaints from their cages and try to pierce handlers with their

sharp bills.

"Loons are the ones that absolutely break your heart," said Alison Hermance, who manages the volunteers. "They make these lonesome little cries."

Southern migration down the Pacific flyway is underway, and birds are arriving hungry and exhausted from the arctic tundra and boreal forest. "This is a critical Pacific flyway stop for hundreds of thousands of birds," said Melissa Pitkin, director of education at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO). "At least 500,000 shorebirds have been seen in the bay each year."

Though the majority of oil has been cleaned up, residue will continue to affect birds and wildlife for an unknown time. Some of it is still floating free in the ocean; some has covered rocks and is hard to clean but easy for a bird to stumble into. Some has sunk into soils and sands, affecting smaller creatures and plant life that many birds and mammals eat.

"Shore and wading birds that dig down into the mud and eat crustaceans may suffer secondary poisoning, as well as raccoons and other scavengers that eat dead oiled birds," Piazza said.

The numbers of birds dropped throughout the week, but authorities declined to guess when the flow of oiled birds will cease. For ten days after the spill, volunteers drove carloads of oiled birds three times a day to IBRRC.

"It almost looks like M\*A\*S\*H up there," Rusert said. "There's a lot of medical attention, tents all over the place, cribs of birds being dried out, people tube feed-

ing and checking the blood of birds."

When birds first arrive, they are given a physical evaluation, and a blood sample is taken to see if there's any infection. They are then fed and hydrated until strong enough to tolerate being washed. Dawn dish soap removes the oil, and the water drains into special tanks so it can be disposed of as toxic waste.

Birds are put under pet driers, and then released into ponds where they can preen their feathers, re-sealing a layer of warm air into their downy undercoat. "People think that the birds have to restore their natural oils. That is incorrect," said Jay Holcomb, IBRRC's executive director in a press release. "Birds feathers are naturally waterproof. All the bird has to do is preen and get its feathers back in alignment."

Over 700 birds have been washed and are now rehabilitating in ponds where they can exercise and gain weight.

The first group of 38 birds passed a barrage of tests before they were considered fit for release near Half Moon Bay last Friday. The second group was also scheduled for release there, until the winds shifted oil back into the area. They were sent to the pristine waters of Tomales Bay instead.

The 34 banded birds arrived from Cordelia in the late morning sunshine, and five volunteers waded into the water to release them.

"You have to hold them very gently and very carefully," Rusert said. "These birds are powerful and feisty. They're looking to get on with the business of being wild."