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New Oiled Birds Tied To Old Sunken Ship Still Leaking Off San Francisco

Escaped oil from S.S. Luckenbach continues to haunt marine wildlife in Northern California – more than 60 years after sinking

Oiled seabirds recently cared for by International Bird Rescue have been conclusively traced back to a leaking cargo ship that sunk off the coast of California more than 60 years ago.

Since December of 2015, Bird Rescue's wildlife center in Fairfield has cared for nine oiled birds including a Pacific Loon, Red-necked Grebe, Western Grebe, and six Common Murres. All the birds were rescued along beaches in Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties.

"International Bird Rescue exists to help mitigate human impacts on birds, and the Luckenbach unfortunately is a huge human mistake that continues to taint these beautiful seabirds," said JD Bergeron, Executive Director. "We will continue to use our 45 years of experience to wash and rehabilitate contaminated wildlife, to train others to do so, to innovate with care options. Ultimately, this whole effort is to get more of these birds back to the wild."

To date, three birds have been released, two are still in care, and the four remaining have died. A Red-necked Grebe was one of those released. Here is description of the steps to recovery: http://blog.bird-rescue.org/index.php/2016/02/patient-of-the-week-red-necked-grebe/.

Feather samples from the oiled birds sent to a California state lab confirmed that the oil came from the *S.S. Jacob Luckenbach* that sank in 180 feet of water on July 14, 1953 about 17 miles west-southwest of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. This cargo vessel was loaded with 457,000 gallons of bunker fuel. It has been leaking sporadically over the years – especially during winter months when strong currents bring oil to the ocean's surface.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) announced these findings late last week.

In early 2002, oil associated with several "mystery spills" was first linked to the Luckenbach. These included the Point Reyes Tarball Incidents of winter 1997-1998 and the San Mateo Mystery Spill of 2001-2002.

Over the years, Bird Rescue estimates it has treated thousands of "mystery spill" birds.

"Bird Rescue has shouldered much of the cost of caring for these oiled birds, going back many years." said Bergeron. "The oceans are becoming less and less hospitable for birds and other marine wildlife, even without these toxins. We step up to help because we believe every bird matters, and we're grateful for the incredible community support we get."

By September 2002, the U.S. Coast Guard and the trustees removed more than 100,000 gallons of the fuel oil from the vessel and sealed the remaining oil inside the vessel – including some 29,000 gallons that was inaccessible to be pumped out of the ship's tanks.

What to do if you observe oiled wildlife

Anyone observing oiled wildlife should not approach or touch the animals. Please report the exact location and condition of the animal to Oiled Wildlife Care Network at (877) 823-6926.

How oil affects birds

When oil sticks to a bird's feathers, it causes them to mat and separate, impairing waterproofing and exposing the animal's sensitive skin to extremes in temperature. This can result in hypothermia, meaning the bird becomes cold, or hyperthermia, which results in overheating. Instinctively, the bird tries to get the oil off its feathers by preening, which results in the animal ingesting the oil and causing severe damage to its internal organs. In this emergency situation, the focus on preening overrides all other natural behaviors, including evading predators and feeding, making the bird vulnerable to secondary health problems such as severe weight loss, anemia and dehydration.

Resources

http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/maritime/expeditions/luckenbach.html

https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/OSPR/NRDA/Jacob-Luckenbach

About International Bird Rescue

International Bird Rescue ("Bird Rescue") has been saving seabirds and other aquatic birds around the world since 1971. Bird Rescue is dedicated to mitigating the human impact on seabirds and other aquatic bird species worldwide, through emergency planning and response, wildlife rehabilitation, research and education. Bird Rescue has led oiled bird rescue efforts in over 220 oil spills in more than a dozen countries. Our team of specialists operates two year-round aquatic bird rescue centers in California, which care for over 5,000 birds every year and a turnkey facility in Anchorage, Alaska.

Bird Rescue is a proud member of the State of California's Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN), hosted at the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California at Davis (UC Davis).

International Bird Rescue is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

Learn more at birdrescue.org