

PRINCETON AREA: 'On a Wing and a Prayer': Bird watchers contemplate the Gulf disaster

Scott McVay: 'By comparison, the Exxon Valdez was a puddle.'

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Editor's note: What's happened in the Gulf of Mexico — what hasn't happened in the Gulf of Mexico — delimit a catastrophe of such range and scope that its impact will not be known for years to come. The Gulf's marshlands rank among the most important habitats for migrating birds in the Western hemisphere. The birds we see in Cape May, in the Plainsboro Preserve, even in our own backyards — many of them are dependent on the Gulf's marshlands at some stage in their lives. As far as wildlife in the Princeton area is concerned, what's happening in the Gulf is happening here — and happening everywhere the web of life extends. M.R.

The story begins:

According to a recent posting by Birders United, the environmental advocacy organization founded in 2004 by the late Theodore Cross of Princeton, “about six million snow geese will begin their southern migration from the Arctic” (in late July and into August). “Many of them will end up along the Gulf Coast. Possible hurricanes or tropical storms in the region could push the oil into coastal marshes where many of these birds spend the winter months.

“Many other bird species that spend the summer months in the Arctic or in Canada winter in the Gulf region. Some of these species include sanderlings, ruddy turnstones, loons, and sandpipers, to name just a few. Millions of birds may be flying into harm's way in the months ahead due to the vast oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. And almost no one believes the cleanup will have been completed before these birds arrive.

“But some encouraging steps are being taken. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has announced a plan to pay farmers in Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Texas, and Missouri to flood their fields to create safe habitat for migratory birds. The goal is to create or improve bird habitat on 100,000 to 150,000 acres.”

Is there anyone out there who hasn't seen images from the Gulf of oil-befouled birds, such as the region's pelicans? Think thousands. Think numerous species, some already threatened, such as the reddish egret and the piping plover.

Last month I reached out to birders to share their personal reaction to the plight of birds in the Gulf of Mexico. One key birder did answer, shunting me to his organization's official position, without a syllable of the personal. Ultimately, by telephone, I've been able to fashion a quilt of quotes. Even so, responses to my questions engendered further questions, many unanswerable. And I am interested in reader responses — please post to New Jersey Wild at www.packetinsider.com/blog/nature/.

Among the first to respond was Tom Southerland. With his wife, Margot, Mr. Southerland has taught more birding to more Princeton- area birders than anyone since John James Audubon.

“It is very, very difficult to watch the suffering birds,” he says. “It’s like a science fiction horror show. And it’s not just resident birds. Migrants will soon be leaving on their autumnal journeys. But, it’s the entire food chain — plankton, porpoises, sea turtles ...” His voice trails off.

“I feel so sorry for the fishermen and their families, for that is often a generational profession. Even for property owners, although I am NOT in favor of coastal development at any time, for the people whose lands are being oiled ... I am against offshore drilling forever. I am very disappointed that only a few weeks before this, our president went on record in favor of drilling for oil off our coasts. I don’t understand it. He seems decent, caring, intelligent ...”

Asked about long-term effects of ingested oil upon birds who were oiled, then cleaned, Mr. Southerland observes, “Well, some can live and breed again. It depends on the amount of oil and the species. Years after the Exxon Valdez, I birded there. We found not many birds — some good, yes, but not the numbers there should have been. You can clean them off, but they have to feed, and they return to their fouled feeding areas. The fish are oiled, too. There’s so much oil underwater — affecting plankton and diatoms. Toxins are working their way up, so the fish die off. Contaminated fish are being taken by the birds.”

Tom Poole, avid Princeton birder and D&R Greenway trustee, was a moving force in the creation of the Charles H. Rogers Wildlife Refuge, located along Stony Brook in Princeton Township. A measured man, he speaks with increasing intensity.

“We have a catastrophe here now. What I feel is anger, frustration, almost helplessness. I see a lack of leadership and understanding. Our priorities are all out of whack. We need to bring knowledgeable people into the act. Confer with others in the oil business around the globe. And what does the Coast Guard know about capping oil wells? Where is the Army Corps of Engineers? Somebody must have some good ideas. I am appalled that that well could have been built without a backup plan ...”

But Mr. Poole returns immediately to imperiled wildlife: “Remember, all birds now in the Gulf area (at the time Mr. Poole was interviewed) are nesting or raising their young. The young must not only be fed healthily, they must learn to walk through oiled sites, fly above and feed in oiled waters. And what about that dispersant? Is dispersed oil any better? It could be worse.”

As with his friend Tom Southerland, Mr. Poole is “concerned about the migration of shorebirds. Early July, in the Arctic, adults leave quickly. Immatures fly later, after putting on sufficient weight for the journey.”

Asked what migrants require as they reach the Gulf region, he answers, “Some keep right on going, flying over water incredible distances without stopping. Some species land. It depends on their fat stores and upon species. And that’s not taking hurricanes into consideration. Birds forced down by contrary winds, let alone turbulence, sometimes can rise again. With oil in the waters?” Silence, and then: “Tanagers, orioles, warblers and the like need to land on islands in the Gulf region to feed, rest and ready for the remainder of their migration. Their refuges are fouled.”

Hannah Suthers, over decades, has tallied and tended migratory songbirds beyond counting in our nearby Sourlands. I had to call her back so that she could first finish hand-feeding “a downed Carolina wren.” Ms. Suthers is licensed by Fish and Wildlife to perform these services. Nestlings are fed every 30 minutes, 16 hours a day, inside her house. Fledglings graduate to the outdoor aviary. She exults over having studied weather forecasts and being able to release fledgling robin just that morning.

Her first response, even in the midst of intense foster-parent duties, is, “Well, I am speechless with horror. This is devastating. There is this heart connection ... but we cannot give up. Even with the helplessness ...”

If non-birders wish to see what’s ahead for the migrants, Ms. Suthers says, “Just pick up any decent birding

guide — check out the range maps, the winter grounds of each species. You'll see where their flights will soon take them.”

Musing on the especial destruction of marshlands by oil, she begins to list species most compromised, those who turn to marshlands for refuge and for food — sedge wren, marsh wren, swamp sparrow, salt marsh sharp-tailed sparrow, seaside sparrow. The common yellowthroat likes marshes. They can winter there without crossing the Gulf. Red-winged blackbirds, rusty blackbirds. “Tree swallows, purple martins roost in marshes. They're two weeks early this year in their gatherings for fall migrations. They'll be searching for food in those oiled marshes before attempting to fly over the Gulf.”

Ms. Suthers adds a new horror to the plight of the waders, those long-legged, usually pristine creatures who bob and feed along the beaches of our summer, then fly in flocks with one mind, one spirit. “Sandpipers, plovers are nesting now, all along those Gulf beaches. Off-road vehicles are barreling through there, deploying berms, running right over nests and nestlings. It's a mess.”

Most with whom I discuss the Gulf do mention the food chain. But they mean the water food chain. Ms. Suthers, godmother of passerines (songbirds), considers the air's food chain. Her conclusion, echoed by each in his own way: “The impact will be greater than we can imagine.”

Ornithologist Charles Leck, Professor Emeritus of Ecology at Rutgers, recently gave a presentation on the Natural History of the Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh — freshwater tidal wetlands, connected to the equally tidal Delaware River. Tides carry oil, so I was horrified to learn of oil drilling in store for the coast of Delaware, ignoring the extent and sensitivity of the Delaware Bay.

“Well, it's just incredibly bad luck that it's all happening at nesting time,” Professor Leck says. “They're all concentrated because they're raising their young. They're on eggs, they have nestlings. They can't leave the area. It's a big loss. The trouble is, if you lose a colony ... well, there may be some of that species elsewhere, but, if you lose a colony ... it will take a very, very long time until any return. Birds lose their affinity for a given area when it is befouled.”

At the D&R Greenway talk, Professor Leck recounted the story of ruddy ducks of the Delaware.

“When I was a youngster, the main wintering areas of ruddies was the Delaware River. Must have been 20,000 or so of them. There was an oil spill in the '50s. Wiped out the entire Delaware population of wintering ruddy ducks. Adults would try to reassure me, “They'll come back, Charlie.”” Another long pause. “I am still waiting for them to come back.”

Asked what happens to oiled birds, he says simply, “They cannot preen. If the bird tries to preen, it will die from ingested toxins.” He also frets about dispersants. “Yes, it may remove some of the oil from view. But what happens is that dispersed oil spreads through far more of the water column.”

Professor Leck brings me “Oil Spills,” his Rutgers colleague Joanna Burger's 1997 book. Leading me to wonder why — as this much published naturalist has at least two books on oil disasters, and who knows how many papers — she is not either in Washington or at the Gulf or both. On Page 36, I read of dispersants on the beaches of Cornwall after the Torrey Canyon spill in 1967:

“For wildlife, this treatment proved more damaging than the oil itself, (being) toxic to limpets, barnacles and planktonic organisms floating in the sea. The worst victims were diving birds.” She gives disheartening percentages for recovery of oiled avian species: “Of the nearly 8,000 birds brought in for treatment, only 450 were still alive a month later. Only about 80 were ever set free.”

Professor Leck speaks about treating oiled birds: “You treat 50 — maybe five survive, depending on the species. Manatees are imperiled, yes, but with birds, it's a mess with their feathers. People do a great job, trying.

Have you ever seen this oil? It's really thick, congealed. A National Geographic photographer got into the oil this week, so thick he nearly drowned."

Another aspect of treating oiled birds is that they have to be sequestered somewhere "so they can keep clean, to get well. The trouble is, if they're put where there are domestic species, the wild birds have no resistance to diseases of domestics."

Jumping to the larger picture, Professor Leck asks, "And how messed up is the food chain? There are not many fish. Terns forage in ocean water — what is happening to the food items for the fish, and on up and down? Well, we have had our own examples of oil spills, right here in the Delaware River ..."

Hella McVay is also a D&R Greenway trustee. Hella and her husband, Scott, travel the world in company with key naturalists, always learning. Each was outspoken. Mr. McVay calls it simply "an immense catastrophe, the scale of which we have not known, devastation whose consequences will continue way into the future. By comparison, the Exxon Valdez was a puddle."

"Experiments conducted on the effectiveness of dispersants reveal that they are not effective in removing oil from vegetation, and may further injure delicate vegetation," Mr. McVay says. "Dispersants sometimes move deeper into the soil and stress roots that may have (otherwise) escaped injury from the oil ... Some annual (marsh plants) are killed by a single oiling, while others can withstand repeated low-level oiling ... Annuals and seedlings are quickly killed by a single oil spill."

Reached in the middle of tending wildlife in her back yard, Ms. McVay says that she wishes she could give "a political response to this tragedy — because all roads lead to politics. What do you expect from recent years of greed and deregulation? We went too deep without regulation. This is our signal — retreat from greed." About remedial methods currently in place, "It's not either/or. We have to do both. Cap the well to stop the flow, and clean up the oil. The third piece is, get the best minds of the world together to solve this problem. So far, there is nobody who has come up with a brilliant idea."

Both McVays observe that "people are overwhelmed by crisis upon crisis, disaster after disaster. Exhaustion has set in."

I need to place at the top of his interview virtually every observation from Princeton University Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Henry Horn. For him, as well, my questions often triggered questions.

"What bothers me," Professor Horn begins, "is this attitude of 'Well, let's clean up.' As though one could get rid of everything. This oil spill requires dispassionate review. But I have no notion where to start. As a scientist, I want to start. But discovery of the realities here is very difficult to achieve."

"With regard to the cleaning of oiled birds," he observes, "that is very difficult. You need luck to do it well. The studies (of oiled birds tended in past spills) are misleading. There's been a triage process: Who is most likely to survive? Pelicans do moderately well, also penguins who do not fly (i.e., penguins do not require feathers to support flight.) Gannets have this interesting feather structure that is easier to clean. Gulls and herons are a whole lot more trouble. The literature is a series of nice case studies of individual birds that have managed to survive. Prospects for bulk survival are not that encouraging. Saving individual birds — well, it's a noble enterprise ..."

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