

Bird Capture Guidelines for Oiled Birds In the Mississippi Canyon 252 Response

General Rules for identifying what birds should be captured and what birds should not.

Generally speaking, oil “smudged” surface feathers of surface feeding birds (i.e., gulls) do not typically put a bird at risk of hypothermia or hyperthermia. A general rule is that if the oil has penetrated the feathers to the skin and impairs the birds waterproofing, then the bird may be vulnerable. However, surface smudging typically does not impair waterproofing. The following guide can be used for birds in the Gulf Coast region.

Evaluating unusual or stress induced behavior of spotty oiled birds;

Oiled birds that are experiencing wetness to the skin or discomfort will likely focus on intensely preening oiled feathers. This is an indication that they are in some level of distress. If a bird with obvious oil on its feathers is observed exhibiting consistent preening behavior, then capture should be attempted.

Important: Remember that all birds preen on and off throughout the day. Your indication of stressed behavior is intensive preening focused on an obvious oiled area.

Surface-Feeding Birds (*gulls, skimmers, coots, gallinules, ducks, white pelicans*)

These species will often get spots of oil on their feathers during oil spills. If they are seen with large amounts of oil that covers any feathered area approximating 10% or more of the entire body, then they should be captured. Birds can also get many small spots of oil on their feathers. These small spots of surface oil typically do not pose a threat to the bird's life. If these birds are not exhibiting intense preening behavior, then these birds should be left in the field.

Diving Birds (*cormorants, anhingas*)

These birds are highly vulnerable to hypothermia when oiled. Any of these species sighted with obvious oil on them should be captured. Oil may be difficult to identify on these dark-feathered species. The bird's behavior may indicate their need to be captured. If these birds are spotted obsessively preening or showing signs of heat stress (panting) or hypothermia (shivering and lethargy), they should be captured.

Plunge-Diving Birds (*brown pelicans, gannets, terns*)

These species run the risk of getting wet and waterlogged when plunging for fish if they have oil on their feathers. A general rule is that if 10% of their feathers or more are wet to the skin, then they should be captured.

Small Shorebirds (*sandpipers*)

Small sandpipers are highly vulnerable to hypothermia and predation by predators once they become oiled and weak. Oil on their feet and legs tends to get smeared on belly feathers and can impair their waterproofing. This is not always evident when viewing them through binoculars. Any shorebird with a spot of oil (dime-sized or larger) that has clearly penetrated the feathers to the skin should be captured. Birds with small spots of surface smudging and not exhibiting signs of distress should be left alone.

Large Wading Birds (*herons, egrets, spoonbills, ibis*)

Large wading birds only need to be captured if over 20% of their body is oiled. Many of these birds will get oil on their legs and tips of their wings and tail feathers. They are usually flighted, and most likely are OK. If the body is oiled over 10% of the total body, then capture should be attempted.

Group Capture (e.g., nets, noose mats)

If non-oiled birds are captured in the process of capturing oiled birds, any non-oiled and non-injured birds should be released immediately. This is because of the high risk of hyperthermia in transporting a normal bird in hot and humid climates. Birds should be transported for care only if they are contaminated with oil, have clear loss of waterproofing (i.e., due to dispersants), or seem ill or injured.

If possible, send written information with birds that are unusual. For example, if one bird in a group is clearly different from the rest of the group, provide that information on the transport cage.

If capturing birds in a group, it is important that proper field techniques (appropriate for the species and conditions) are used. Capture should occur early in the day to avoid the heat of the day. If capture must be attempted later in the day, the risk of hyperthermia is very high. Minimize the chase time (use hand held launchers if available), pay close attention to the bird's behavior when captured, and place birds in a cool location as soon as possible.

All personnel should be experienced with the equipment that is being used and the species the equipment is being used with. Nets need to be species appropriate, with particular consideration for weight of the net and diameter of the net openings. Danger zones must be clearly marked to avoid incidental take.

If a cannon net or other net is used, birds should be immediately covered with landscaping cloth to protect from heat and sun. Birds should be removed from the net immediately and either released or placed in keeping cages. No bird should be left in a net without a shade (landscaping cloth) covering it.

Exception: Birds in nesting groups should not be captured without approval of the Houma Incident Command. See "Wildlife Response Action – Bird Nesting Colonies, MC 252 Oil Spill"

Transportation of Captured Birds

TRANSPORT CONTAINERS

1. A transport container must provide enough room for the animal to comfortably turn its body around while only gently brushing against the walls. More than one bird of some social bird species can be housed together (gulls, shorebirds, pelicans) in one container but caution should be made to not overcrowd them, as they can quickly overheat if ventilation is not adequate.
2. Each transport container must have proper ventilation so that toxins from the oil and heat from their bodies can escape. This typically means that airflow can pass through from one side to the other.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: For this spill, ONLY plastic flight kennels should be used for bird transport due to the possibility of overheating. In hot weather birds should NOT be transported in cardboard boxes

Plastic Flight Kennels

Plastic flight kennels (large size) can hold large and small birds such as pelicans, gulls, etc. Plastic dog kennels are the container of choice as they are very sturdy, cleanable and come in a variety of sizes. All cages must have towels, absorbent pads or rags placed in the bottom of them to help prevent slippage and allow adequate cushioning to help protect bird feet and keels and absorb fecal matter.

Gulls, skimmers, terns – no more than 4 gulls to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Pelicans - no more than 2 pelicans to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Shorebirds – no more than 8 to a plastic flight kennel

Cormorants – no more than 2 to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Large herons – no more than one to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Small herons – no more than 3 to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Coots, gallinules – no more than 6 to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Gannets – no more than one to a plastic flight kennel (large)

Note: When transporting birds in land based Vehicles

When transporting birds in land vehicles, the air conditioning must be on at all times with plenty of airflow to prevent overheating. Cages should not be left in the sun for longer than 10 minutes.