

2 The Wildlife Mission and Best Practices Deepwater Horizon MS-252 Oil Spill

What is our Mission?

1. Rescue oiled living wildlife
2. Remove dead wildlife

KEY POINT: It is important in the ICS for each resource (in this case, each person) to stick to their Mission.

Who are the major players?

State wildlife agencies, Law Enforcement, Air support, Tri-State and IBRRC, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Experienced wildlife vets.

Vessels of Opportunity – VOO and/or ICRVs Integrated Community Response Vessels (which are dedicated to skimming operations): Coast Guard approved, local boat captains. Program to keep fishermen employed and use local knowledge and resources. Thus far, these folks have been very helpful. They are also making considerably less money than they normally would under good fishing conditions.

State agencies are the lead agencies in wildlife operations.

- Have much local knowledge and provide many resources (30-40% of vessels, in some states)

Who has trust responsibility?

USFWS

Migratory Birds

T&E Species

Sea Turtles (on land)

States

All non-Federal T&E wildlife/fish

Fisheries (within State Waters)

NOAA/NMFS

Marine Mammals

Marine in Federal Waters

Sea Turtles (at sea)

Tri-State Bird Rescue (Tri-State, for short) and **International Bird Rescue and Research Center** (IBRRC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are overseeing the wildlife-rehabilitation (rehab) response along the Gulf coast.

- These rehabilitation organizations are non-profits that specialize in oil spill response. FWS has worked with them for many years, and they are considered the leaders in this type of work.

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- They are receiving additional support from other rehabilitators and wildlife and environmental organizations.

What is the process set up for our mission?

Reconnaissance (Recon):

- Biologists, law enforcement agents and state wildlife agencies are using aircraft, vessels, land vehicles (4- or 6-wheeler), small barges and foot patrol to scout for oiled wildlife and marine life.
- Radio coordinates are called in to capture crews.
- Sometimes recon and capture crews are combined.
- Air Operations are located at Patterson and Lakefront (Houma Sector); and Mobile, AL, Panama City, FL, and Apalachicola, FL (Mobile Sector).
- Vessel, Land, and Foot Operations are out of Operation Centers.
- BP Wildlife Hotline - 866-557-1401.

Capture and Rescue: Deployed from Operation Centers

- Boat Based: 1 captain; 2-3 biologists (State wildlife agencies and USFWS)
- Deployment type:
- Deployed to retrieve live or dead birds from recon ops (short trips)
- Combined Recon/Capture to patrol for wildlife, capture, return (longer trips).
- Land Vehicle (Truck or 4- or 6-wheeler): 1-3 biologists
- Wildlife hotline:
 - Priority rescue/recovery because of involvement with public. After investigating the report, no matter what the outcome, contact incident supervisor so that the reporting public can be informed of the outcome.

Triage:

- Temporary quarters for oiled birds located near the boat landings.
- Vets are on hand to wipe off much of the oil using soft towels.
- The birds are stabilized with fluids and their temperature is taken. Once or twice a day, the birds are taken to rehabilitation centers for washing.

Transport:

- Crates are transported by boat(s) or air-conditioned vans to the rehab facilities. Vehicle temperature should be **slightly cooler** than the outside air – NOT COLD. Think about getting into an air conditioned vehicle while still wet: you will feel cold a lot sooner than

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if you were dry. The wet birds feel this too, but their smaller body size means they cool much more rapidly than you.

Rehab:

- Birds and other wildlife species are transported to the Oiled Wildlife Recon & Recovery Facilities.
- Washing stations run by Tri-State (IBRRC is a sub-contractor on this incident).
- Rinsing off the Dawn soap is of utmost importance.
- The birds are fed, given vitamins, allowed to preen and feed, and live in pens until released.
- If they do not meet the standards for release, they are euthanized.
- A separate rehab station for sea turtles was set up by an ocean research facility. But Wildlife Recovery branch personnel are allowed to rescue and transport sea turtles to their nearest rehab facility. Wildlife species of concern in Mississippi include Diamondback terrapins and Gulf salt marsh snakes which can be picked up by the Wildlife Recovery personnel and taken to the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Gulfport, MS. Oiled marine mammals such as dolphins, manatees, and whales as well as sea turtles are taken to the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans and other locations along the coast for rehab and holding.

Best Practices for Live Bird Recovery Operations:

When to Capture:

Capture should be attempted under the following general conditions

1. The capture can be completed without endangering the safety of you, your coworkers, or your vessel.
2. The capture will not disturb birds in nesting areas or rookeries
3. The captured bird is obviously oiled, unable to fly, and may be preening itself excessively.

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.

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Nesting locations:

The following guidelines should be followed for any oil spill operations during nesting season:

- Do not approach or enter nesting areas.
- If you notice birds in the area that are acting agitated, calling or swooping at you, there is a good possibility you are in an active nesting area.
 - Terns and gulls are very aggressive protectors of nests, dive-bombing around you to ask you to leave. If in a tern rookery, disturbance may signal dinner bell for gulls, which will predate tern nests quickly.
 - Piping plovers use the broken wing act to decoy you to leave the nest area.
 - Retreat the way you approached, and leave the area.
 - If you must continue, do so at or below the tide line.
- Minimize any activities around shorebird and seabird nesting areas.
- Stay below the tidal line.
 - Seabirds and shorebirds nest above the tide line.
 - Their nests and eggs are extremely well-camouflaged, which makes them vulnerable to being stepped on or run over.
 - Stay out of the dunes and cross them only at approved access points.

Tips for handling oiled birds:

Equipment:

- Long-handled dip nets with removable nets having mesh size so that the head of the bird cannot fit through mesh
- Pet carriers – medium and large or Cardboard boxes
- Paper bags for dead wildlife, sharpie pens or pencil for labels.

Search, Capture, and Transport:

- Heavily oiled birds seek a place to haul out; regularly check for birds at rigs, platforms, floating debris, islets or sheltered places.
 - Birds can be far from oiled areas.
- Mornings are usually when weather is calmest and the birds may be cold, hungry and easier to capture.
- Minimize disturbance of non-oiled birds during capture operations.
 - Groups of resting birds should never be hazed.
- Pet carriers are used to hold and transport birds.

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- The size is selected to allow bird to stand normally and turn around without hitting the sides.
- Line the bottom of carrier with towel or pad to prevent slipping and line the metal grate door with fabric or fine screen on the inside to prevent bird bill injury.
- Pelicans, gulls and terns can be housed together in the larger container, but other species should be placed in separate containers.
- Birds that have been chased are susceptible to overheating (Especially when in carriers), watch for an open mouth for overheating.
 - Assure good ventilation and transport as soon as possible.
- You may receive further protocols for capture of oiled birds.

Bird Handling:

You will learn this on the job, but there are some best practices to keep in mind.

- Place your hands over the bird's wings and hold them against its back.
- While lifting the bird, minimize the amount of pressure around the thorax to prevent compromising their ability to inhale and exhale.
- The bird's keel needs to be able to move in ventral/dorsal direction for respiration.
- Use index and middle finger to extend the head for further restraint.
- Care should be taken since the limbs of small birds break easily. Always grab the whole bird and not just the limb.
- Larger birds' wings may be held in one hand over the back and the legs grasped with the other hand (IBRRC does not recommend this technique).
- For frightened or fractious birds, the head can be covered with a cloth.
- Methods used for holding and carrying birds vary greatly depending on the bird species.
- It is important to consider the potential health risks for both the bird and the person holding it.
- Long-legged birds should be carried with the legs held out behind the bird, held at the hocks and with one or more fingers between the legs to ensure they do not rub against one another.
- After the legs have been extended it may be possible to fold them gently under the body, but this should not be forced and they should not be kept folded for long periods of time.
- Long legged birds held with the legs folded for prolonged periods may never be able to stand up again and have to be euthanized.

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Handling Risks to the bird:

- Holding the body too tightly – interferes with respiration.
- Carrying by the wings – brachial paralysis, wing fracture.
- Wings allowed to flap or strain excessively – wing fracture, feather damage, capture myopathy (muscle damage).
- Legs – fracture, particular problems of long-legged birds, potential for self-injury (e.g. ripping neck open with claws while struggling).

Risks to the holder:

- Biting.
- Legs – scratching, penetration of claws (particularly raptors), kicking.
- Wings – particularly large birds such as geese and swans. Note some species have a carpal spur or spurs on the wings.
- Long-billed species such as herons, rails, etc. may stab with their bill and this should be treated with respect. A ball of bandage may be taped over the tip of the bill to reduce the potential for injury.
- Goggles may be worn to protect the eyes when catching and holding long-billed birds.

Sea turtles:

- 5 species are listed as endangered /threatened by the NOAA and FWS T&E program.
- NOAA is the lead agency for sea turtles off shore, and FWS is the lead for sea turtles on the beach.
- If sea turtle is encountered, radio in to your incident supervisor and request instructions (nesting season is here – FWS manages nest sites in the Gulf states)
- See turtle fact sheet for migration and nesting timing.