

Spill source sought as oil disables seabirds

By Terri Morgan
Special to the Mercury News

More than two dozen oil-coated seabirds have washed up on beaches throughout Santa Cruz County in the past two weeks, but officials so far have been unable to pinpoint the source of the oil.

"They've been found on beaches from Waddell Creek to Pajaro Dunes and everywhere in between," said Tricia Wilson of Native Animal Rescue, which has been cleaning and caring for the birds. "The same thing is also happening along San Mateo County beaches as well."

"The birds are coming in alive, but not all of them are surviving."

— Tricia Wilson, Native Animal Rescue.

A Coast Guard spokesman at the Marine Safety Office in Alameda said oil samples collected from the birds have been sent to a laboratory for analysis. Results are expected later this week.

The latest discoveries mark the second time this year that birds coated with oil

have washed up on central coast beaches. In February, more than 60 birds were killed and hundreds more were fouled.

Coast Guard investigators later determined that the oil was Alaskan crude, meaning it had come off a tanker. They narrowed a search to the 29 such ships

that had passed off the coast during the last 12 days of January.

In the latest case, officials said, the Coast Guard is investigating the possibility that last month's breakup of a nearly empty oil barge outside the Golden Gate Bridge may be the source of the oil. The

barge, Crowley No. 51, broke in half while being towed and released a small amount of oil.

"The barge is one of the possibilities we're looking at, but we can't say one way or another until we get the report back from the lab," said Chief Port Securityman Jane Carlton.

Despite the efforts of volunteers, Wilson said, many of the birds are succumbing to the effects of oil.

"The birds are coming in alive, but not all of them are surviving," Wilson said.

See BIRDS, Page 2B

Rescuing of oiled seabirds requires special technique

BIRDS, from Page 1B

"It's very sad and frustrating when these birds are brought in. It makes us mad because we know how hard it's going to be to try and save them."

Wilson said many of the birds are suffering from hypothermia, which occurs because oil-matted feathers lose their waterproofing abilities. Some birds have become ill after ingesting oil preened from their feathers. And others die from a combination of oil contamination and the trauma of being handled and bathed by humans.

"Stress is a very important factor," said Wilson.

There have been a few successes, however. Wilson said the group released six birds Sunday.

Common murrelets — thought to be one of the most abundant spe-

cies of seabird in the Northern hemisphere — spend most of their lives at sea. They breed on the Farallons and other rocky, off-shore islands. With their snowy white bellies and black heads and backs, the short, stubby birds are often mistaken for misplaced penguins.

Wilson recommends that anyone finding an oiled bird cover it with a towel, scoop it up in a box and take it to the Native Animal Rescue

facility, which is in the Santa Cruz SPCA building at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Rodriguez Street.

Donations are being sought to purchase fish to feed the recovering birds. For more information, contact Native Animal Rescue at (408) 462-0726.