

Oil-soiled sea birds get help from animal-rescue workers

2-4-86
By TOM LONG

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Local animal-rescue volunteers have been working day and night since Sunday to aid hundreds of sea birds soiled by three coastal oil slicks of undetermined origin.

"We're just swamped," said Nancy Naslund, a volunteer worker at the Native Animal Rescue shelter. "People are calling every minute. People we don't even know are combing the beaches and bringing birds in."

Volunteers from the Native Animal Rescue and from the Monterey SPCA have been bringing the birds to PG&E's Moss Landing plant, which has a warehouse cleaning facility specifically built to deal with such a crisis.

"We've had a few dozen volunteers working from Sunday night on," said Bill Leonard, PG&E spokesman. "We've handled about 300 birds so far and lost maybe a dozen of them." More than 1,000 birds have been treated so far along

the Northern coast.

"Most of the birds are ones that spend their lives swimming in the water, not just the kind who swoop down to feed," Leonard said. Murres, grebes, loons and auklets have been some of the birds most affected.

Included in the painstaking process of cleaning the birds are treatments for dehydration and hypothermia. In some cases the birds have ingested oil.

"Not just anybody can do this. They need to be trained," said Leonard. "We have a number of tubs and sinks. Then when the birds are cleaned they are put in drying pens where we use large blow dryers."

"Cleaning birds is not a laundry problem," said Alice Berkner of the International Bird Rescue Operation in Berkeley. "It's a very involved process and takes a lot of time."

The Native Animal Rescue recommends that persons finding coated birds throw a towel over the bird, put it in a box and take it to the SPCA at 7th Avenue and Rodriguez Street. Persons should not try and

clean the birds themselves.

Coast Guard Petty Officer Wayne Winner said Monday that officials have "no idea" where the oil came from. The first slick was spotted Saturday, and the other two were found Sunday.

However, investigators have identified the type of oil in the spills. Coast Guard Petty Officer Kathleen Potter of the Marine Safety Office described it as a "heavy bunker type oil used as fuel on ships."

Still, investigators have been frustrated in determining which ship might be responsible because they don't know exactly when the slicks appeared.

The National Park Service closed Muir Beach in Marin County Monday and began monitoring waters for possible contamination of spawning salmon. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard manned beaches around Half Moon Bay as globs of the sticky oil began washing ashore.

And exhausted volunteers faced another day of cleaning man's mistakes off mother nature.

By TOM LONG
Sentinel Staff Writer

IT'S A VERY small, very crowded and chaotic Native Animal Rescue office that Rosemary Blankley pokes her head into. "Need any help?" she asks.

"Not that I know anything," she adds. Still, she squeezes her way in and sits down. Immediately behind her comes a couple with a small, oil-covered bird, wrapped in a towel. Blankley helps them put the bird into a box. She knows how to hold a box open and that's some help.

Caroline Clem is on vacation from her New Mexico home. She found three birds while walking along Pajaro Dunes. For the past few hours she's been helping out

and now she's loading her car up with boxes of birds to be transported to Moss Landing.

She doesn't really know where Moss Landing is. But she's learned quite a few things in the past few hours, so she's taking it all in stride. "I'm getting quite an introduction to sea birds," she laughs.

A lot of people have gotten quite an introduction to sea birds in the past few days. Last weekend saw three nasty oil spills along the Northern California coast, oil spills that killed countless sea birds and left thousands of others battling for life.

And suddenly the Native Animal Rescue, a local organization that specializes in helping wildlife, found itself swamped with work as people began finding

birds washed up on the beach and blackened with oil.

"My husband and I were walking on the beach and we saw this bird covered with oil and the poor thing couldn't swim," remembers Kim Zatalia of Santa Cruz. "So my husband took off his shoes and socks and went in the water and got it."

As did a lot of other people, the Zatalias brought the bird they found to the Rescue office. The main clean-up facility for the sea birds is down at PG&E's Moss Landing plant, but NAR staff found themselves the relay point for literally hundreds of ailing feathered friends.

They also found themselves the center of an outpouring of community assistance.

"People have been calling and

asking what we need, bringing in dishwashing liquid, mineral oil, water piks, sheets, everything we asked for," says Tricia Wilson, one of the five steady volunteers who run the NAR office, as she opens the door to a closet and checks on birds awaiting transportation to Moss Landing.

"Everytime we send out to a store, somebody either donates what we need or gives us a discount," she says, and reaches to get new water for the birds.

A few minutes later Wilson is back in the crowded office, speaking to four or five people who've just shown up and want to help. "A lot of people can work normal hours," she says, "But we're going to need help 24 hours a day for the next few weeks."

Wilson estimates that more

than 150 people from the Santa Cruz community have helped in the effort so far, doing everything from folding boxes to actually washing the birds. Many who phoned in their concern were asked simply to go out to the beaches and find the birds.

As she speaks, veterinarian volunteer Dr. Betsy Bowerman is behind her, flashing a penlight down the neck of a loon who's acting dangerously lethargic. Even though she does this sort of thing on a year-round basis, she understands the community outpouring of concern in the face of a tragedy.

"I think just because we live in a seaside community where people see the oiled birds right in front of them they respond to it,"

she says. "Some of these people are coming in and they've named the bird they found and they call up later to see how it's doing."

And even though the regular volunteers want to make sure it's understood that this crisis will go on long after the first week's rush, and that the NAR is always in need of both manpower and funds, they're also thankful for all the help they've gotten while still hopeful of more in the future.

"We realize there's always different levels of involvement," says NAR Director Tim Corcoran over the phone from Moss Landing where he's been cleaning birds all week. "And every little bit helps."

In this case every little bit has helped a lot of birds.