

## Rescue center aids hundreds of at-risk birds

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The seabirds flew 700 miles from Oregon to Fairfield, but not under their own power: Stricken by toxic algae, they were loaded onto a Coast Guard plane for emergency care at a bird rescue center.

The migratory birds, including grebes, murrelets, scoters and loons, have lost their waterproofing ability as a result of what is known as an algal bloom, which slimes them, strips them of their natural oils and leaves them wet and cold. The more seriously affected birds drown or die of hypothermia.

The culprit is a species of phytoplankton that has flourished in the Northwest as a result of warmer-than-usual ocean temperatures. Stormy weather has churned up the water, creating a sudsy foam that disrupts the alignment of a bird's feathers, which act like shingles on a roof to protect the creatures from the elements.

Thousands of birds have died in the past week as a result of the phenomenon off the coast of Oregon and Washington.

About 150 injured birds found on beaches were taken by van from Portland to the International Bird Rescue Research Center in Fairfield, arriving Saturday night. On Monday, 305 more birds were put into crates and flown by a Coast Guard C-130 Hercules to McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento before being brought to the center.

Twelve birds have had to be euthanized, but the rest are recuperating, Jay Holcomb, the center's executive director, said Tuesday.

Many have undergone tremendous stress while dealing with the slime and trying to make sense of why their usual layers of protection aren't working anymore.

"What was their protection became their enemy," Holcomb said. "Their security is the ocean. When they get wet, they have to come to shore. When they're on shore, there are eagles and coyotes and everything looking for them."

Without their usual waterproofing abilities, the birds that return to the water can drown.

Those that remain on land "are in a complete stress mode," Holcomb said, thinking, "I'm available to predators."

Their rescue by humans is also stressful, he said. "The poor bird thinks it's going to be eaten," Holcomb said.

At the Fairfield center, staffers try to reduce the birds' stress by moving quickly - washing them as fast as they can before putting them into special bedding and letting them swim in warm pools. Eventually, they regain their natural oils.

"They adjust here the best they can," Holcomb said. "Each species is different."

Each bird is expected to stay anywhere from a week to 10 days. The cost of caring for the birds is mounting, and although the treatment is similar to what would happen after an oil spill, there's no oil involved in this disaster - and that means no responsible party will foot the bill, Holcomb said.

A number of groups helped fund Saturday's transport, and the Coast Guard donated Monday's flight. But the cost of rehabilitating the birds is expected to exceed \$50,000, said Paul Kelway, a center spokesman.

Biologists say the number of algal blooms has increased in recent years. A similar event off the Monterey coast in 2007 killed and injured hundreds of birds.

"Nobody can really understand why we're getting it more and more," Holcomb said.

Kelway said the blooms "seem to be lasting longer. It seems to be pointing to some kind of human impact."

### **helping the birds**

The International Bird Rescue Research Center is soliciting donations to help save the injured birds. For information about donating, go to [www.ibrrc.org](http://www.ibrrc.org) or call (707) 207-0380.