

Algae Bloom Epidemic

Survival takes flight

Volunteers transport birds, stricken from crippling foam, to California shelter

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Barreling down Oregon Highway 202 in a rain-pelted Subaru Monday, Rebecca Dmytryk explained how an algae bloom off the coast of Oregon and Washington has been crippling seabirds since last week.

"It's compromised the structure and alignment of their feathers. Think of it like the shingles on a house - when a few shingles come out, all the elements can pour in. Saturated birds don't float," she said.

After considering the thousands of live birds that have washed ashore, Dmytryk then thought of the many more that simply sank at sea.

"Double? Triple? Quadruple? All of a sudden the ocean started sucking them under."

In a race against the clock, Dymtryk and two others from the International Bird Rescue Research Center had just flown up from California to lighten the load on the overwhelmed Wildlife Center of the North Coast in Astoria. In a day-long cooperative effort that involved a U.S. Coast Guard C-130 cargo plane, Oregon Humane Society volunteers and several dozen local volunteers at the Wildlife Center, about 350 birds were transferred into pet crates and shipped south to McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento.

It would take until about 8 p.m. Monday night to get all the birds into the Fairfield, Calif., facility, where rehabilitation and cleaning could begin, Dmytryk said.

A crippling 'foam'

The algal bloom that hurt the birds is called akashiwo sanguinea, and is relatively new for this part of the coastline. Greg Schirato, regional program manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the phenomenon first occurred a few years ago in Monterey Bay, Calif., and then appeared earlier this year off the northern Washington Coast.

"In September we saw this event off the Olympic Peninsula ... and we flew in to try to determine which species were effected," he said. While they weren't able to save many birds that time, beach surveys were conducted, preparing them to respond to a future event.

That event came much sooner than expected, and hit thousands of red-throated, common and Pacific loons, as well as common murrelets, Western grebes and surf scoters last week. Losing any bird was tragic, but for Schirato, there was one that was of particular concern.

"The common loons are of special interest to us. It's a state threatened species, with less than 12 breeding pairs in Washington," he said.

So when Schirato heard of another wave of the sanguinea last week, and the hundreds of birds showing up at the Wildlife Center of the North Coast, he knew that help was desperately needed.

The first trip

First the International Bird Rescue Research Center people made the 13-hour drive up from California on Saturday and shuttled 150 birds down to their facility in a rented truck. With nowhere else to take injured sea fowl in the area, about 125 birds arrived to take the freed up spots over the weekend.

And despite an outpouring of help from volunteers, the Wildlife Center was still jammed with birds - many had been there for days and still hadn't been cleaned, Dmytryk said.

On Sunday, Dmytryk started making calls to see if an airplane could fly up to Oregon and bring more birds back to the International Bird Rescue Research Center's larger facility in Richland, Calif.

First she called commercial cargo carriers, but when they quoted her a \$30,000 price tag, the price was just too much.

"We can't do that," she told them.

But then she thought of the Coast Guard, and an instance in 2008 when a Coast Guard helicopter crew rescued a handful of California condors out of the path of a raging wildfire.

"I thought to myself, 'Well, they can just say no.'"

Schirato called in the formal request, which was quickly approved by Coast Guard District 11. Just in time, the group was able to get federal and state permits for the Monday transport.

Both Schirato and Dmytryk were overjoyed that the Coast Guard could help save the ailing birds.

"It was just amazing support that the Coast Guard was able to provide," Schirato said.

"We asked and the Coast Guard came through for us. The Coast Guard has been so great," Dmytryk said.

The Coast Guard's C-130 cargo plane and its seven-person crew helped load and unload the pallets full of pet crates into the belly of the plane, late in the afternoon. Cmdr. Pete Schichtel headed up the Sacramento-based flight crew. He said they all enjoyed the chance to be able to contribute to the unusual mission's success.

"This is the first time I've ever hauled birds. Usually we're looking for fisherman, or someone who has been lost. We really enjoy this," he said.

Now, room for more

Barbara Linnett has been working the phones at the Wildlife Center, giving Director Sharnelle Fee a break from the constant ringing and questions of the past week. Linnett had been a weekly volunteer before the algae bloom hit, but is now coordinating the approximately 25 volunteers who are keeping the facility running round the clock. Volunteer turnout has been excellent.

"People have really stepped in to do things they probably didn't know they could do," she said.

Linnett watched as the birds were tucked, one by one, into crates by the competent hands of Bird Rescue Research Center volunteer Doris Duncan. Some squawked, some pooped, and some cowered as she tucked her left hand under their breast and gently ringed her right hand around beaks as they birds moved from cardboard boxes to portable pet carriers.

Linnett thinks that the pace of birds coming in to the center may have slowed over the weekend, but now they'll have room to take more. Before the International Bird Rescue Research Center people came on Monday, temporary pens had been created out of pvc pipe and sheets, assembled in corners and hallways. Even the laundry room held a makeshift corral of common murre among the piles of soiled laundry waiting to be washed.

Linnett said donations to the center are still desperately needed, to pay for food, supplies and increased utility costs for the 200 to 300 birds still at the center.

"This is so out of our budgetary parameters," she said.

She walked through the aisles of birds, pointing out a baby grebe drying out in the warm breeze from a hairdryer. She pointed to its feet, ankles bent like a bow used to shoot arrows.

"See their funny little feet? That's why they are on the netting," Linnett said. Keeping the birds out of the water and walking on hard surfaces for days will cause injuries to their fragile bones, Dmytryk said.

And leaving them on their feet for too long will most certainly be fatal, she added.

"There's a very small window of time to get them rehabbed," Dmytryk said.

About 10 hours later, speaking by phone from California, she called the trip a success.

"We just unloaded all the birds. Everything worked out great," Dmytryk said.

Next comes feeding, medical treatment and washing the birds, she said. And with luck, about 80 percent could be released into the wild within a few weeks.