

Foam from ocean algae bloom killing thousands of birds

By Lynne Terry, The Oregonian
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A slimy foam churning up from the ocean has killed thousands seabirds and washed many others ashore, stripped of their waterproofing and struggling for life.

The birds have been clobbered by an unusual algae bloom stretching from the northern Oregon coast to the tip of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state.

"This is huge," said Julia Parrish, a marine biologist and professor at the University of Washington who leads a seabird monitoring group. "It's the largest mortality event of its kind on the West Coast that we know of."

The culprit is a single-cell algae or phytoplankton called *Akashiwo sanguinea*. Though the algae has multiplied off the coast of California before, killing hundreds of seabirds, the phenomenon has not been seen in Oregon and Washington, and has never occurred on the West Coast to this extent, Parrish said.

"We're getting counts of up to a million cells per liter of water," she said. "Think about that. That's pretty dense."

Marine biologists said it is not clear why the algae are multiplying, though they do flourish in warm weather. Recent storms could have contributed to the problem, with crashing waves breaking them up.

The algae get whipped by the surf into something akin to a sticky soap that looks like the top of a root beer float. The foam can be deadly to seabirds because it washes off the natural oils that keep them waterproofed.

Without that protection, they get cold, wet, eventually dying of hypothermia.

When they wash ashore, they are covered in foam.

"It looks like they're lying in a sea of bubble bath," said Greg Schirato, regional wildlife program manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. He said thousands had died.

This algal bloom, unlike the toxins produced by blue-green algae, poses no threat to humans or pets. But the bloom could kill fish by clogging their gills, said Zachary Forster, phytoplankton specialist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"We haven't seen any instances of that," Forster said.

The first seabird die-off in the Northwest occurred in mid-September, with swarms of dead and dying birds washing up on beaches around Kalaloch on the Olympic Peninsula.

At least a thousand scoters, or sea ducks, were killed, Parrish said.

"Then it subsided and we thought it was over, but it started up again," she said.

This time Oregon was hit as well.

On Tuesday, birds flooded ashore on the Long Beach Peninsula and on beaches as far south as Cannon Beach, prompting an outpouring of calls to the Wildlife Center of the North Coast near Astoria.

The center, the only wildlife rehabilitation facility serving the northern Oregon and Washington coasts, is working around the clock treating more than 500 birds.

"We're in an emergency crisis mode," said Dr. Virginia Huang, president of the center's board.

Not only are volunteers retrieving struggling birds in northern Oregon and Long Beach, but officials from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife are also trucking them in from the Olympic Peninsula.

Barbara Linnett, a volunteer at the wildlife center, said the majority of seabirds that have poured in are common murrelets, common loons, red-throated loons and grebes.

The center feeds them vitamins and fluids to hydrate them, then puts them in shallow pools of water. Swimming in clean water -- and preening -- helps the seabirds rebuild their waterproofing.

Linnett hopes some of the birds can be released in a few days.

In the meantime, marine biologists from Oregon, Washington and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service are watching conditions closely, hoping that this was a freak event.

The last time it occurred was in 2007 in Monterey Bay, when hundreds of seabirds were killed.

"That event enabled us to figure out what is happening here," Parrish said.

-- **Lynne Terry**

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