

Helping Oiled Wildlife

Many people are feeling helpless and frustrated by the current Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. Unfortunately, citizens searching for a way to help may run into dead ends without understanding why. One such topic is the response and rescue of oiled wildlife. Brooke Saari, UF/IFAS Marine Science Extension Agent with Okaloosa and Walton Counties, provides helpful advice on this topic in today's article.

Many bird species, 21 marine mammal species and five species of sea turtles call the Gulf of Mexico home. Specific professionals are permitted and trained to handle each of these types of impacted wildlife.

All wildlife rescue and rehabilitation efforts are being coordinated through U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research. Trained professionals have been organized by the Wildlife Branch of the Unified Command to respond to animals affected by the oil spill. The responders are authorized personnel previously trained to handle stranded marine animals through the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program and Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network. Primary care and rehabilitation facilities have been identified by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service and USFWS to provide rescue and care. Tri-State is the contracted authority to handle oiled wildlife and response and has a primary care facility in Pensacola to treat oiled birds.

Rescuing animals may seem like an easy and useful thing to do. However, it can be dangerous and harmful. Oil is a hazardous material when in direct contact with human skin. Handling a distressed animal can be dangerous since it will be scared, defensive and may cause bodily harm to rescuers. Also, further stress and injury to the already struggling animal may occur. There may be immediate treatment needed at the time of rescue as well as laws protecting the animal. So it is important to leave the rescue and rehabilitation to those who have been identified and permitted by USFWS and Tri-State.

The most helpful course of action is to first report the location, type if known and time to the Oiled Wildlife hotline at 866-557-1401. And then call the Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge at 850-650-1880. If you find non-oiled wildlife, report it immediately to the ECWR, there is no need to call the hotline in these situations. To report oil and/or tar balls on Florida beaches call 877-272-8335 or dial #DEP on a cell phone. There are many opportunities to volunteer during this incident. Interested individuals can call 866-448-5816 or go to www.volunteerfloridadisaster.org and check the listing by county. To get updated on numbers of oiled wildlife collected in each state go to www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com and look for the fish and wildlife report.

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