



REDHEADS BY BILL MARCHEL

Gulf Disaster and Minnesota Birds

THE APRIL 2010 OIL SPILL in the Gulf of Mexico happened about 1,200 miles away from Minnesota, but the fouled waters could harm the state's migratory birds. Our state bird, the common loon, and 12 species of Minnesota waterfowl winter along the Gulf Coast.

"This is a tragedy, not only for the Gulf states, but [also for] the entire continent," DNR wildlife biologist Rich Baker said.

According to Ducks Unlimited, more than 25 waterfowl species, including 13 million ducks, winter in the Gulf, mostly in Louisiana and Texas. The Gulf also hosts nearly half of Minnesota's estimated 12,000 loons in winter.

Even as the oil slick has dissipated on the water's surface, scientists say impacts from the spill could continue from oil and oil dispersants underwater and in the food chain. Loons remain at risk of oil exposure because they dive as deep as 200 feet to pursue prey in their wintering waters, said DNR Nongame Wildlife Program supervisor Carrol Henderson. Juvenile loons are especially at risk because they stay in the Gulf for up to three years after their first migration south from Minnesota.

The U.S. Geological Survey and the DNR

implanted satellite transmitters in three loons in central Minnesota this past July to follow their movements south this fall (their migration is being tracked online at www.umesc.usgs.gov/terrestrial/migratory_birds/loons/migrations.html).

"It is a small sample size," Henderson said, "but it could help us develop longer-term strategies for monitoring the fate of loons on their wintering grounds."

DNR waterfowl biologist Steve Cordts said that other diving birds, including duck species such as scaup, redheads, and canvasbacks, also continue to be threatened by after-effects from the oil spill. In an attempt to keep migrating waterfowl from heading into the Gulf, government agencies and conservation groups are working together to create temporary wetlands north of the area affected by the spill. For example, Ducks Unlimited is paying rice farmers to flood their fields in the fall. Bird experts hope that migrating waterfowl will see these wetlands first and winter there, instead of flying farther south to the Gulf.

As for the Gulf, only time will tell what the ultimate impact will be on migratory birds.

“[Waterfowl] need a clean, healthy, and diverse marine environment. It may take years to restore such an environment in the Gulf. No one knows at this point how long that may take,” said Henderson. “When the environment is cleaned up, then the wildlife victims of the oil spill can begin to recover. We aren’t going to know [the impact] until birds start coming back.”

Birgitta Anderson, *editorial intern*

 www.mndnr.gov/magazine See a multimedia video of the loons being tagged with satellite transmitters.

Dollars for Wildlife Action

DURING THE PAST DECADE, Minnesota’s wildlife species in greatest conservation need have benefited from the federally funded State Wildlife Grants program. Congress created the program in 2000 with two aims: to prevent species from becoming threatened or endangered and to aid recovery of species already listed. The program required each state wildlife agency and their conservation partners to develop a wildlife action plan. Minnesota’s plan, *Tomorrow’s Habitat for the Wild and Rare*, identifies native species that are rare, declining, or vulnerable to decline; and it outlines actions to help protect and recover them.

Minnesota’s loon monitoring program, for example, receives funding from the program. Baseline population data from this long-term monitoring project will be instrumental in assessing the impact of the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico on Minnesota’s loon population.

Together, the states’ wildlife action plans amount to a nationwide strategy to recover native species and prevent them from becoming endangered. In 10 years, Minnesota has received \$12.5 million to support over 50 projects benefiting species from northern myotis bats and Blanding’s turtles, to longear sunfish and greater redhorse fish, to regal fritillary butterflies and timber rattlesnakes. DNR staff and partners identify priority conservation areas, purchase land, restore and manage habitat, and conduct species and habitat research. To learn more, visit www.mndnr.gov/cwcs/swg.html.

Sarah Wren, *DNR rare species guide project manager*



DNR PHOTOS

NEW CHAMP

A new big tree champion red pine, Minnesota’s state tree, was found in Chippewa National Forest near the Lost Forty Trail. The tree’s circumference 4 1/2 feet above the ground is 115 inches. Its height is 120 feet, and its crown spread is 38 feet.

SEASON OPENERS

Sept. 1: bear, mourning dove, snipe, rail; Sept. 4: early Canada goose season; Sept. 18: small game, archery deer; Sept. 25: woodcock; Oct. 2: waterfowl, fall turkey, moose; Oct. 16: pheasant.