

Oil spill puts coastal wildlife at risk

DAILYCOMET.COM

Published: Thursday, April 29, 2010 at 6:31 p.m.

Last Modified: Thursday, April 29, 2010 at 6:31 p.m.

HOUMA — Oil hitting coastal areas in Louisiana now seems imminent, wildlife officials said Thursday, and a diversity of species along Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, as many as 400 different animals, could be impacted.

At greatest risk, many coastal advocates say, are sea birds and shore birds. Now nesting on beaches and barrier islands around the Gulf coast, bird populations have already been significantly impacted in Louisiana by coastal erosion.

"For birds, the timing could not be worse. They are breeding, nesting and especially vulnerable in many of the places where the oil could come ashore," said Melanie Driscoll, Audubon bird conservation director. "The efforts to stop the oil before it reaches shore are heroic, but may not be enough."

She added that this could be a "true catastrophe for birds."

Gov. Bobby Jindal has declared a state of emergency in connection with the Deepwater Horizon oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico Thursday.

The declaration states that the oil could reach the Louisiana coast today, and proceed into Breton and Chandeleur sounds by Saturday. Louisiana wildlife refuges that could be affected, include the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary, which stretches from the mouth of the Mississippi River and extends into Terrebonne and Lafourche. However, predictions issued Thursday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration indicted the oil slick was headed east toward Plaquemines Parish and the Mississippi/Louisiana border.

Booms to capture and deflect the oil are being deployed at Breton National Wildlife Refuge, where thousands of brown pelicans and shorebirds are currently nesting.

The brown pelican, Louisiana's state bird, nests on barrier islands and feeds near shore. Their breeding season has just begun and many pairs are already caring for eggs. The brown pelican was only removed from the endangered species list last year and remain vulnerable, officials with the Audubon said. Their relatively low reproductive rate means any disruption in breeding could have serious effects on the population.

Terns, gulls and beach nesting shorebirds such as plovers are also nesting or preparing to nest on beaches and barrier islands in Louisiana. Roosting on the sand, they are at risk if oil comes ashore.

Terns and gulls plunge into the water to fish, and are extremely vulnerable to oil on the surface.

"We're not just talking about birds getting oil on their plumage and ingesting oil," said Steven Cardiff, a researcher with the Louisiana State University Department of Natural Sciences. "Whatever this is doing to their food resources will also make an impact. If they can't stop the flow and this goes on, this could just be a disaster of monumental proportions."

Populations of coastal birds that nest on barrier islands and beaches in Louisiana have been declining due to erosion and hurricanes, said Richard DeMay, researcher with the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program.

"If oil gets to these colonies that are kicking off their nesting, shore birds and sea birds in particular, they could be drastically impacted."

Other bird species that could be impacted if oil comes inshore include the herons, egrets and other species that feed in marshes. Particularly, the reddish egret, a specialized resident of the coast with a dwindling population, will have nowhere else to go if their feeding and nesting grounds are fouled by oil.

Birds that spend a significant portion of their lives at sea could also be affected by oiled waters. Contact with oil could damage their feathers, or they could ingest toxic oil while grooming themselves. Oil also threatens their food supplies.

"Those birds, you really never see near shore, always stay off shore, so no one really knows what the impact to their populations could be, it's difficult to monitor," DeMay said.

Many birds are also making their spring migration through the area, and will be stopping along the Gulf Coast to rest and feed, Cardiff said.

Migratory shorebirds, such as plovers and sandpipers are currently en route from wintering grounds in South America to breeding grounds in boreal forests and arctic tundra. They congregate in large numbers on beaches and barrier islands to rest and refuel during their long journeys.

Migratory songbirds such as warblers, orioles, buntings and swallows and others fly nonstop across the Gulf of Mexico as they migrate between their breeding and wintering grounds. Most spring migrants move across the Gulf during from late April to early May. The journey across 500 miles of open water strains their endurance to its limits.

They depend on clear skies and healthy habitats on both sides of the Gulf in order to survive the journey.

In addition to bird impacts, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials said, sea turtle nesting season is approaching and Gulf sturgeon are congregating in coastal waters for upstream migration. Both species could be harmed by the spill.

Tom McKenzie, a spokesman for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said the agency hasn't begun any animal clean-up activity or received reports of fouled wildlife.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is conducting aerial flights to look for oiled wildlife for recovery and treatment. BP, the company leasing the rig responsible for the spill, has contracted for bird and wildlife rehabilitation experts from around the country to treat any fouled wildlife.

A toll free number has been established to report oiled or injured wildlife: 1-866-557-1401. You shouldn't attempt to help injured or oiled animals yourself.

Volunteers to help protect wildlife from the oil spill may sign up by calling 1-866-448-5816.