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Algae bloom killing seabirds mystifies researchers

By Lynda V. Mapes
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HOBUCK BEACH, Neah Bay, Clallam County — They died in droves: common murrelets, scoters, loons and more, in the largest-ever-recorded kill of seabirds on Washington's coast.

Bedraggled dead seabirds tangled in sea wrack on this remote, wild beach are just some of more than 8,000 birds killed since just after Labor Day, scientists estimate. The death toll — which might eventually pass 10,000 — is from a mysterious algae bloom still off the coast that has scientists and researchers worried and mystified.

"I think it's scary. We have no record of anything like this in the past 30 years, and no one knows why it is happening," said Julia Parrish, associate director of Aquatic and Fisheries Sciences at the University of Washington. "We are not used to big natural disasters, but this is one of them."

Up and down Washington's coast, scientists are reporting the longest lasting and largest harmful algae bloom ever recorded here, and the largest recorded mass mortality of seabirds ever in Washington waters. "It's bigger than an oil spill," Parrish said.

Ken and Mary Campbell of Port Angeles first realized something was terribly wrong when they walked Sooes Beach at the Makah Indian reservation in Neah Bay last week. They were kicking through calf-deep brownish foam on the beach. And they saw birds they don't usually see on the beach: seabirds.

"There were about 30 of them, and they were not land birds; we knew something was up," Mary Campbell said. They quickly realized the birds were in distress; some looked dead already, and were moving only their eyes. "The worst of all were the loons; they were crying," Campbell said.

Long Beach was also hard hit last week. Die-offs just as bad and worse happened the month before, at First, Second and Third Beach.

Scientists are assessing whether the number of seabirds lost is high enough to affect populations of seabirds already



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Dead seabirds found on Hobuck Beach are measured by Mary Sue Brancato of Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary.

Information

To learn more about the seabird rescue response or to donate:

Wildlife Center of the North Coast: coastwildlife.org

International Bird Rescue Research Center:
ibrrc.org/algae-slime-response-2009.html

in trouble, such as scoters.

"So many of our species of seabirds were already in decline, and we don't even know why, so a mortality event like this with such a large number of birds is certainly a concern," said Mary Sue Brancato of the Olympic National Marine Sanctuary in Port Angeles. She was at Hobuck Beach on Wednesday, tallying carcasses of seabirds.

The species of algae causing the trouble, *Akashiwo sanguinea*, is not unusual to find in Washington waters. But it is very unusual to find in such high concentrations, of as much as 1.5 million cells per liter of seawater.

Waves break the cells of the algae, releasing compounds that create a foam that is both sticky and soapy. Any bird that swims or dives into it is at risk, because compounds in the foam strip natural waterproofing oils from the birds' feathers. The birds quickly become hypothermic and stressed, struggling onto beaches to escape the cold water.

The bloom is not harmful to people or pets. And scavengers eating the carcasses of the dead birds aren't in peril.

Volunteers have been taking the birds to rehab centers, including the Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) shelter in Lynnwood. It may take the sea birds as long as six weeks to recover by preening their feathers, said Virginia Huang, president of the board of directors for the Wildlife Center of the North Coast, in Astoria.

That rehab center was so packed with birds last week and through the weekend that the Coast Guard on Monday airlifted more than 300 seabirds to the International Bird Rescue Research Center in Fairfield, Calif.

"We were completely overwhelmed," Huang said. "We put out a call for help. Every single cage in the hospital was filled and we had temporary pens on the floors, kennels stacked two and three high; rooms we didn't even usually keep birds in were full of birds; we were turning people away; we just didn't have the capability to care for them."

The crisis has ebbed, with little foam and few struggling birds found on the beaches this week — so far. But this is a situation that scientists have already seen ramp up and down since September, with the bloom moving, separating, meandering in patches, but not yet dispersing.

There is plenty of harmful algae still out there, said Anthony Odell, who leads a harmful algae bloom sampling program for the University of Washington Olympic Natural Resources Center in Forks, Clallam County. Another storm is predicted to hit the coast this weekend, and it could whip up another batch of killer foam besieging a whole new wrack of birds.

"We don't know why it (the algae) is so persistent," said Vera Trainer, a research oceanographer with the Northwest Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, who specializes in harmful algae bloom. She said no one yet knows any one cause of the bloom.

"We need to look at these organisms as indicators of some kind of change, whether climate change or other factors," Trainer said. "The ocean is trying to tell us something."

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