



Frequently Asked Questions About Oiled Wildlife

Q: How do I report oiled wildlife?

A: At any time (during a spill or not), you can report oiled wildlife to the OWCN's Oiled Wildlife Hotline at 1-877-UCD-OWCN. During major oil spills, you should be able to reach a live operator at this number. When no spill response is occurring, a "phone tree" will provide general oiled wildlife information and direct you to the best person to contact in your area.

Q: I want to help oiled wildlife. Can I help collect wildlife?

A: Collection of oiled wildlife requires special training, for the protection of both you and the animal. Personnel (paid staff and pre-trained volunteers) that are used for oiled wildlife recovery have been trained in wildlife capture techniques and in specific health and safety issues, including issues related to exposure to oil. One of the best ways to help the OWCN rescue oiled wildlife is to become a member or volunteer at one of the OWCN's 30 member organizations before an oil spill occurs. By volunteering with one of these groups you will gain valuable animal contact experience and be eligible for the OWCN's specialized training in rehabilitating oiled animals. For more information, please contact the OWCN's volunteer coordinator at (530) 752-4167.

If you have not been trained for wildlife recovery prior to an oil spill, chances are that you will not be able to help with this task during the current spill. Spill responders are often too busy during spills to train new personnel, as the training requires, at a minimum, a three-day health and safety program plus a one-to-two day animal capture workshop. However, there may be a need for "convergent" (e.g., not pre-trained) volunteers to help with other aspects of wildlife care, including transportation to care facilities, and helping with numerous tasks at care facilities. During a spill, a hotline number will be set up for potential volunteers.

Q: Can I help by cleaning wildlife myself at home or at the beach?

A: NO! Cleaning of oiled wildlife requires special training, equipment and facilities. Based on many years of experience, the OWCN has developed the best possible protocols and facilities for caring for oiled wildlife. For example, the OWCN has learned that stabilizing the health of oiled animals prior to cleaning has a dramatic positive effect on survival. There have been numerous cases of people trying to do the right thing by attempting to clean animals themselves, but ending up harming the animal further. Please report oiled wildlife to the Oiled Wildlife Hotline (see above), and let trained experts capture and care for the animal. You can help by keeping an eye on the oiled animal (from a distance), and trying to direct members of the public away from the animal, to prevent it from being scared back into the water.

Q: Why are birds the only animals that seem to get affected by coastal oil spills?

A: Many wildlife species (as well as plants and other natural resources) can be impacted by oil spills. However, it is true that seabirds are most often impacted. This is because: 1) there are comparatively more seabirds in California than other species at risk, such as marine mammals; 2) seabirds spend a lot of time floating at the surface of the water, where most of the oil is; and 3) the microscopic structure of feathers that keeps birds waterproof is damaged, leading quickly to hypothermia. Because sea otters also spend most of their time on the surface of the water and use their dense fur (with a microscopic structure similar in some ways to feathers) to keep warm, they are also extremely vulnerable to oil spills.

Q: Is rehabilitation really effective? Don't the birds just die anyway?

A: OWCN strives to provide the best achievable capture and care to wildlife during oil spills. Health of rehabilitated animals is carefully assessed during the rehabilitation and prior to release to optimize the probability of survival. OWCN successfully releases, on average, more than half of the animals brought into care facilities during oil spills. Unfortunately, animals do die during spills. Those that have a poor likelihood of survival are humanely euthanized to reduce any suffering that might occur. The OWCN also conducts intensive research on the fate of the animals that are released – often by attaching small leg bands or radio devices to the backs or flippers of the animal. While survival varies by species and by spill, the studies conducted by the OWCN have shown that most released animals survive as well as non-oiled animals.

Q: What happens after the spill? Who decides how settlement money is spent?

A: It usually requires several years of damage assessment, negotiation, and often litigation, before a settlement for restoration funds is reached. Natural resource trustees, including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (and often several other agencies) form Trustee Councils to develop restoration plans and oversee the implementation of restoration projects. Trustee Councils solicit public input and talk to experts on local natural resources in the development of a draft restoration plan. Further public input is sought on the draft plan, and this input helps guide the development of the final restoration plan. Actual restoration projects might be implemented by agencies, non-government organizations, or private corporations. For information on the status of restoration efforts for any spill in California, see the OSPR Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration website: <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/ospr/spill/nrda/nrda.html>.