U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Chesapeake Bay Field Office

Patuxent River Oil Spill: Bringing Back Ruddy Ducks

In April 2000, a pipeline ruptured spilling more than 140,000 gallons of oil into Maryland's Patuxent River, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay. Natural resource trustee agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA and the State of Maryland, working closely with the Responsible Parties, Pepco and ST Services, conducted natural resource damage assessments of injured resources. The spill injured or destroyed wetlands, beaches and wildlife, including resident birds and hundreds of ruddy ducks.

Ruddy Ducks on the Patuxent

Ruddy ducks are a migratory species that breed in wetlands located in the Prairie Pothole Region of the Midwest, including portions of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota and southern Canada. Their migration corridor to the Atlantic Coast extends from North Dakota across Minnesota and southeast Michigan to the Chesapeake Bay where they overwinter. From February through mid-April ruddy ducks migrate from the Bay back to their nesting grounds in the Prairie Pothole Region. Prairie potholes are specialized wetland habitats that have been seriously reduced in past decades. Prairie potholes are grassy, water-holding depressions of glacial origin. These potholes provide the most productive wetland habitat for waterfowl in North America.

How Many Ruddy Ducks Were Lost?

Waterfowl mortality studies estimated that 553 ruddy ducks were lost due to the spill. This included ducks killed by the spill as well as the number of young lost.

Restoration of Ruddy Ducks

To replace the number of ducks lost, the trustee agencies calculated that 1,853 acres of nesting habitat needed to be restored. Due to the fact that ruddy ducks are an open water species which feeds on the hard substrate of the river, alternatives like restoration of marshes or bay grasses would not compensate for the loss of this species. After a public review and comment period, the trustee agencies decided that restoration of ruddy duck nesting habitat would have the most beneficial effect on ruddy ducks.

Cultivating Cooperation

Restoring farmland of Prairie Pothole Region to perennial grass cover will increase nesting habitat, producing additional ruddy ducks and enhancing wintering ruddy duck populations on the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay.

The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service has established programs that acquire perpetual easements from farmers that protect and restore nesting habitat for ruddy ducks and other species. Farmers enrolled in the program can continue to grow hay or graze animals in these areas. So far, 474 acres are being restored and protected by easements.

Oysters and Resident Birds

Other resident birds like heron and osprey were also affected by the spill. These birds rely heavily on the Patuxent River for food. They live in the area year-round and would not benefit from increased nesting habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region. Improving water quality through additional oyster reef acreage was selected as the best method for compensating for the loss of these birds.

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