



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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NEW TREATMENT FOR OIL-DRENCHED BIRDS SHOWS PROMISE

Birds washed ashore "practically onto the front doorstep" of a woman in England may have brought an answer to a problem which has plagued American bird-lovers for a long time--the problem of oil-drenched birds which perish from starvation if not given attention and which too often die of pneumonia when they are.

An interchange of correspondence in the files of the Department of the Interior contains information which the biologists of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service hope is an answer.

The disastrous effect of oily water upon water birds--game and nongame--has long been known. In fact it is one of the reasons for the Federal Oil Pollution Act of 1924 making it illegal to dump or pump oil into the territorial waters of the United States.

A bird landing on oil-topped water is very apt to stay there. The oil has a tendency to mat the feathers and prevent flight. Often the birds starve. Often they are washed ashore where they are picked up by persons who attempt rehabilitation--with a resultant mortality of as high as 90 percent.

Rehabilitation usually involves washing the bird in detergents or soapsuds, which removes all the excess oil but also washes away all of the natural oils. If a bird so treated attempts to swim, it sinks like a rock; if it is exposed to the air it usually contracts pneumonia and dies. If it has practically the same care as that given a new-born babe it might live through the two weeks necessary for its glands to secrete sufficient oil to put it back in normal condition.

But a week ago from England came word of a new treatment--the use of Fuller's Earth or Prepared Chalk which absorbs the excess oil but which does not rob the feathers of their natural oil. There are other things, such as drying the feathers, feeding properly, and keeping the room temperatures correct, but the key step is absorbing the oil rather than washing it from the feathers.

American sources have not formally gathered statistics on bird losses through oil pollution but at times local areas have reported heavy losses from that source. A 1957 survey made by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds indicates that about 80,000 birds a year die on Britain's shores from oil contact.

One English woman naturalist moved to a house located only 50 yards from the Atlantic Ocean, and had the bird problem virtually "dumped into her lap". After "much trial and error and advice good and bad" she and others working on the problem developed the treatment which she admits is new but which is getting results.

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Address delivered by Robert E. Johnson, Special Assistant
to the Commissioner, for Mr. Suomela who could not attend.