



USFWS Alaska Migratory Bird Management
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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Alaska Seabird Die-off

What's Happening?

Thousands of dead and dying murrens have been washing up on beaches this year, from California to the Gulf of Alaska. Dead birds were first reported in March. Events continued throughout the summer and increased during fall and winter. Murrens normally spend the winter offshore, but instead have remained near coastal Alaska. Even more unusual, murrens have turned up at inland locations this winter (including Fairbanks!) and have been observed swimming and presumably foraging in openings in rivers and lakes – both of which are unusual behaviors for a seabird.

Seabirds are indicators of what is happening in the marine system. Seabird mortality events occur occasionally, especially after a hard winter, and causes are often difficult to determine. This current die-off, however, appears to be unusually large.

What's Being Done?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with USGS Alaska Science Center, National Park Service, the Coastal Observation and Survey Seabird Team (COASST), the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Alaska SeaLife Center, and the Bird Treatment and Learning Center (Bird TLC) in response to this event and to determine the extent of this die-off.

Nearly 100 murre carcasses have been sent to the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisconsin for disease and toxicological testing. Results indicate starvation as the cause of death, likely related to warmer than usual sea-surface temperatures beginning in 2014. Additional factors include an El Niño event predicted to be more extreme than any previous El Niño event, all of which influence the distribution and abundance of cold-water prey species used by marine birds and mammals. Some beaches are being regularly walked by trained COASST citizen scientists to better document the die-offs. These surveys provide estimates of numbers of birds affected.



Photo courtesy of David Irons

Please don't touch or collect any sick or dead birds. Leave the birds where they are and document the die-off. If disease was a cause of death, then it is best to be safe, not handle the birds, and keep your pets away. Carcasses are a food bonanza to winter scavengers such as eagles, ravens and mammals.

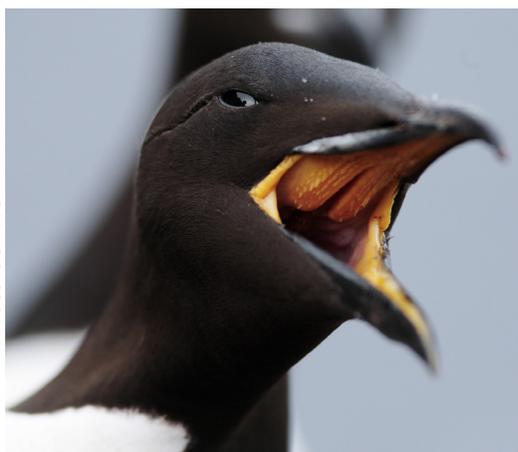


Photo USFWS

What Can I Do?

Report dead seabirds:
 1-866-527-3358 or email AK_MBM@fws.gov

- Date & Time
- Exact location (latitude/longitude and length of beach)
- Type of bird (species name or group e.g. murre, auklet, etc.)
- Estimated number of birds (for each species)
- Photos

Contribute to citizen science
<https://depts.washington.edu/coasst>