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Gulf disaster worries bird scientist

Danette Dooley



Bill Montevecchi carrying a Northern Gannet at Cape St. Mary's.
(photo: Tony Power)

The impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil explosion in the Gulf of Mexico hit home for local seabird scientist Bill Montevecchi when the first photos of heavily oiled birds affected by the spill were of northern gannets from eastern Canada.

With thousands of gannets from this province heading back to the area in September, Montevecchi is looking for funding to put satellite tags on some of the birds in order to track them "in real time."

"We'd know exactly where the birds are and when they go into the Gulf of Mexico," the Memorial University researcher said during a telephone interview from Alberta Tuesday.

There are six breeding colonies of northern gannets in Newfoundland and Quebec - the only such colonies in North America.

Montevecchi and his researchers are currently working in partnership with Environment Canada to band birds in both provinces.

However, he says, a more in-depth initiative such as the satellite tagging system needs to take place.

Montevecchi has applied for funding for this tagging from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC).

The organization has supported his research for decades, he says.

"This is the kind of funding we want; it's independent funding for independent researchers," he says.

Montevecchi is in Alberta attending meetings of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

In addition to his work at Memorial, he also has an appointment at Harvard University.

Later in the day Tuesday he hoped to talk with scientists from the United States about assisting in funding to begin a satellite tagging project.

Putting fishermen and scientists on the water to tag 50 birds from this province and 50 from Quebec would cost about \$400,000, he says.

"It's expensive, but in view of what's happening it's literally just drops in a bucket," he says.

Montevecchi says while birds now making their way back to this province from the Gulf of Mexico aren't showing signs of being affected by the disaster, that doesn't mean they have all escaped unscathed.

"Some of the reason we don't see oiled birds is because they didn't get out of the Gulf of Mexico."

Even those found and cleaned of oil on the outside may not survive as they've lost their natural oils that keeps them waterproof, he says.

"Sometimes when you clean them they've ingested so much oil trying to clean themselves they're lethally injured internally."

Montevecchi describes the fire, explosion and sinking of the semisubmersible drilling platform in April, which killed 11 workers, as an engineering error rather than an accident.

It's not out of the question that what happened with Deepwater Horizon could happen in this province, he says.

Deep water drilling in the Orphan Basin off Newfoundland's coast is even deeper than the drilling that was taking place when the Deepwater Horizon disaster occurred, he says.

"There are birds out there but there's no independent surveillance. It's just surveillance by the oil industry."

Preventing a spill is imperative, Montevecchi says, as chemical dispersants used in cleanup efforts can also cause havoc in marine eco-systems.

"Once it happens it's just crisis management," he says.