

Bird die-off puzzles biologists

By Joel Gallob

Of the News-Times

Approximately 75 dead Rhinoceros auklets have washed up on a 4.6-mile stretch of beach north of Seal Rock in the past three weeks, puzzling U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Dave Pitkin as to the cause of their death. But, he said, "It's a widespread event, for sure."

Dead Rhinoceros auklets have been found from just south of the Columbia River to the southern Oregon coast. And, he said, "in terms of the numbers, it is un-

precedented." Pitkin is with the Fish and Wildlife Service's Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

There are a few other species also arriving dead on the beach, said Pitkin - horned puffins, fork-tailed storm petrels and common murrelets - but none anywhere near the numbers of the dead Rhinoceros auklets.

"The birds I've seen are very emaciated, they look like they're starving," said Pitkin. "But it's anybody's guess what's causing it. We do not know a lot about the winter-time diet for these birds. They're farther offshore now, and it's diffi-

cult to get any information about them because the ocean is so rough this time of year, too rough to get your boat out."

Numbers

Much of what is known about the die-off comes from Bob Loefels, who, with his wife Shirely and Vicki and Laimon Osis, regularly walks the same 4.6-mile beach stretch between Lost Creek and Beaver Creek, noting anything unusual.

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"I was out on the fifth of March and I did not see any Rhinoceros auklets. I didn't see any in January or February, either. On March 7, I found five birds, three were Rhinoceros auklets, one who was a horned puffin and one was a murre."

The group went out again March 11, and March 16-17, and found, along with those found on March 7, a total of 75 dead Rhinoceros auklets. On March 21, the Ossidis' found five more. And, says Loeffels, there's going to be more.

Loeffels said it is important when trying to assess the scope or significance of the present die-off not to simply compare the 80 mortalities to previous highs in any month. A fairly high number of the species wash ashore dead in summer or fall; the highest count in the past, he said, came in one October. But the birds in the summer and fall, he said, are small, just-hatched birds, not the approximately 1-year old birds he and his associates have been finding this month. "It's apples and oranges," he said. "The adults should be considered differently from these birds-of-the-year" found this March.

Eighty dead Rhinoceros auklets in March on a Lincoln County beach, Loeffels said, "is unheard of, unprecedented."

The reason for the more common, but smaller, summertime die-off is as unknown as the reason for the current die-off.

Location

Loeffels said the first reports of the dead Rhinoceros auklets came out of Coos Bay three weeks ago. Since then, reports of the dead Rhinoceros auklets have come in from Clatsop County on the north down to Bandon on the south coast. "I've not have any information for the Washington coast, but I think it is not likely this is not occurring there," he said.

In Clatsop County, one dead Rhinoceros auklet was found with a band on its leg from Middleton Island in the Gulf of Alaska. That,

said Loeffels, suggests this event is "bigger than the Oregon coast. But the information is in fragments, or rather, segments, at this point. It's hard to say what areas are involved," he said. But if dead Rhinoceros auklets are coming from that far north, "you think they'd be on Washington and British Columbia beaches, too."

Possible causes

The one thing certain, Pitkin said, is this has been a very rough winter storm season, and the birds are visibly emaciated. That suggests there was something about this storm season that impaired the birds' prey population or the birds' ability to forage for the small fish they eat. Still, at present, Pitkin said, the specific cause of death is "a mystery."

Pitkin's office on Wednesday sent one of the dead birds to the National Wildlife Health Lab in Madison, Wisc. for a complete autopsy. Results are expected back in a couple of weeks. "They will let us know about anything they can find - diseases, parasites, starvation, they'll go through the whole list," Pitkin said.

He discounted the possibility the birds died of avian flu. "This just seems all wrong for that," he said. "The birds out there now are well distributed at sea, and not packed together in a colony, like they would be in breeding season, where they could transfer the disease from bird to bird. So the chance of avian flu is, I think, quite low."

Another possible, but unlikely, explanation according to Pitkin is a broad underwater die-off of the sort the Oregon coast has seen three times in recent years. The presence of those events was signaled by large numbers of dead crabs washing up on Oregon's beaches. Nothing like that is happening, now, Pitkin said.

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