



NEWS GUARD PHOTOS BY JEANNE DEVLIN

USUALLY ONCE A MONTH, Jane Boyden of Otis, above left, and Sue Gabriel of Neskowin, above right, scout a stretch of shore for COASST.

For the Birds

Seabirds can be for the ocean or shore, what the canary is to a coal mine

By JEANNE DEVLIN
The News Guard

Trudging ahead in the sand, with their hair wrapped up in scarves and a backpack flung over a shoulder, Sue Gabriel and Jane Boyden could be mistaken for typical Oregon beachcombers.

And 29 days out of each month, if you spotted them on this pure white stretch of Neskowin beach, that's exactly what they would be.

But not today. Today, they are citizen scientists.

In Boyden's backpack is neither suntan lotion nor novel but calipers, ruler, camera, gloves, waterproof paper, pencils and — her bible on such days — *Beach Bird: A COASST Field Guide*.

Her eyes — and those of Gabriel — may occasionally light up at the sight of sunbeams dancing on the waves, but mostly they scan the beach back and forth, back and forth, like guards posted in a watchtower looking for escapees.

Boyden is searching not for agates nor shells hidden in the soft drifts of sand and shadows of driftwood but for stray murre feathers, bits of seagull wing and

always seabird carcasses.

It is not a glamorous job, but it is the calling of a Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team member.

And though Gabriel, who calls Neskowin home, and Boyden, who lives in Otis, have joined COASST for different reasons ("I'm a birder," says Boyden; Gabriel is a third-generation Oregonian), they bring the same methodical, relentless touch to their bird-surveying task.

Seeing the two volunteers work the beach answers many of the questions someone who loves this central Oregon shore might have. Questions like:

Who notices when too many birds are dead on the beach?

How can you tell if too many dead birds is, well, too many — or just a normal amount in the aftermath of a winter storm?

Does it matter which species of birds you see?

Does it matter whether the dead birds are babies or adults?

(The answers to those questions are: COASST volunteers, COASST training, "yes" and "yes.")

Presently 38 COASST volunteers participate at 19 sites in Oregon, but ideally there would be a volunteer for every mile or two of beach in the state, say COASST organizers.

Why survey birds? Why not crabs or sea stars?

Boyden says it's because birds are common enough to be useful, while not so common as to be overwhelming. Birds also provide lots of useful information (even in death) about the state of the coastal environment.

Weather, fisheries, coastal



SUE GABRIEL, left, bands a dead murre as Jane Boyden, right, makes a closer examination.



IF THEIR METHODS recall the field work of scientists, that's because Sue Gabriel and Jane Boyden are nothing if not methodical.

habitat change and even feral cats and dogs can affect bird populations. "Some species, like the common murre, are so sensitive to environmental events, they are the 'canary in the coal mine' for Pacific Northwest coastal ecosystems," according to the COASST Web site.

Its objective may be to ensure a healthy environment, but COASST was literally established to identify the carcasses of marine

birds found on beaches along the outer coast of Washington State.

A project of the University of Washington, in partnership with the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, COASST has since expanded south into Oregon.

Tracking dead seabirds is important, because by creating a baseline of data, or a "normal" pattern of beached bird mortality, COASST data can be used to determine when human-induced events, such as an oil spill, or other unusual phenomena, like dead zones, have affected bird mortality.

So Gabriel and Boyden are nothing if not careful.

At the sight of a pile of feathers, Gabriel plops to the ground, pulls on gloves (essential because dead birds can carry disease) and commences measuring the dead bird's bill, wings and tarsus.

Boyden extracts the field guide, ruler and camera.

They endure bad smells, moldy feathers and skeletons that would make Tim Burton blush, all in hopes of being able to identify the bird, document its basic measurements and, if possible, determine what could have happened to leave, in this case, a mature common murre with its

head pulled back and brains hollowed out.

Often the birds they find are not intact. Sometimes the tide claims a carcass before they can. And, every now and again, they see something they've never seen before. On this particular trip, it is a tiny, immature murre.

"It might be the smallest we've ever seen," said Boyden.

"It's also the first intact bird we've found," she noted.

"He's pretty fresh," observed Gabriel. "He's kind of a pretty chocolate color."

As the two look over the small dead body — perfectly preserved except for its eyes, which are both missing, you can tell how badly they wish the small bird would just get up and fly away.

"We found one last year," said Boyden, "that looked like if we could have given him CPR, he would have just woken right up."

Tonight, the little murre will join a list of nine dead birds spotted on that day's walk.

"I'll go home and fill out my forms," said Gabriel, "and mail them."

And with that, the two citizen scientists will turn — like Cinderella — back into their ordinary beach-loving selves.