



TELLTALE SIGNS

Why volunteers walk area beaches to gather data on seabird mortality

BY **BRENDA HANRAHAN**
PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

When most people walk along Pacific Northwest beaches, they enjoy the beauty of the sea.

Volunteers for Coastal Observation And Seabird Survey Team take a different approach — they look for dead birds.

“COASST volunteers, because they are out there consistently, serve as eyes and ears for us,” said Todd Hass, the survey team program coordinator.

“If there is a catastrophic event like an oil spill, we can compare how many birds die on a normal basis to how many die during the event to get a better idea of the impact of such an event.”

COASST is a citizen-based science project in Washington and Oregon.

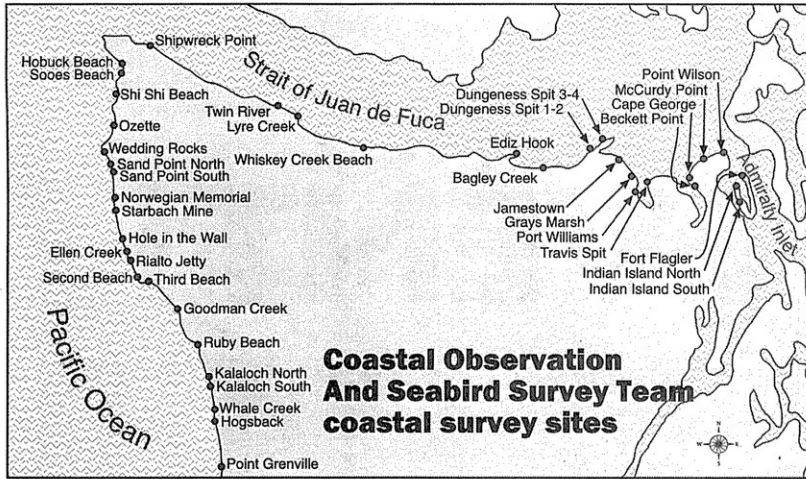
The effort relies on volunteer data to record information on seabird beachings along the coast, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the San Juan Islands and Puget Sound.

TURN TO **BIRDS/ALL**



BRENDA HANRAHAN/PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

Mary Porter-Solberg of Sequim uses a paint brush to remove sand from the wing of a dead seabird at Hobuck Beach to contribute to a citizen based research project examining the mortality of the birds to help the living ones.



KEITH THORPE/PENINSULA DAILY NEWS



OLYMPIC COAST NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

Tom Golding of Sequim begins working to identify the species of a dead bird on Hobuck Beach.

Birds: Valuable data — even in death

CONTINUED FROM A1

The project is funded through grants from private foundations and in-kind services.

About 85 volunteers from Clallam and Jefferson counties comb area beaches once a month to gather information for an ongoing, long-term bird mortality study.

"I am a member of the Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society, and this is a different way of looking at birds," Tom Golding of Sequim said May 28 while he walked along Hobuck Beach in Makah Bay. "I am interested in conservation and have enjoyed looking at things in a more scientific way."

Because the day's activities included a training session for new volunteers, the survey took four hours, longer than usual. The time it takes for each survey walk depends on the size of the beach.

Chilly conditions

Golding and other volunteers were dressed warmly, the hoods of their coats up, as they walked Hobuck under skies that at first were cloudy but later turned sunny.

Golding, 85, is a retired doctor who was getting additional training Wednesday from Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary officials.

The Sanctuary, which donates staff time to assist in collecting information, began partnering with the seabird survey team four years ago, when the survey began.

"The data collected can also be used by the Sanctuary to provide a snapshot of our beaches each month," said Mary Sue Brancato.

Brancato is a resource protection specialist for Olympic Coast Sanctuary and serves as North Coast and Strait of Juan de Fuca volunteer coordinator for the project.

North Olympic Peninsula volunteers take monthly walks along 40 beaches.

Their coverage area

stretches from Cape Flattery to Point Greenville along the coast and along the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the Port Townsend area.

The information they collect helps monitor seabird populations and determine normal mortality rates for birds in the Northwest, Hass said.

Even in death, birds provide substantial information about the state of the coastal environment, he said.

Weather, fisheries, coastal-habitat change, and even feral cats and dogs can affect bird populations.

'Canary in the coal mine'

Some species such as the common murre are so sensitive to environmental and human-induced events that their mortality rates provide "canary-in-the-coal-mine" warnings that foretell danger for Pacific Northwest coastal ecosystems, Hass said.

Just by walking beaches on a regular basis, Volunteers help scientists, researchers and project officials detect oil spills, harmful natural events and environmental changes.

For example, the data can be used to help make oil-response plans more efficient. The reports also can determine long-term changes in the status of resident marine bird populations.

Information collected by volunteers also can help detect unusual events such as increased mortality during an El Niño year.

Data also can be used to determine the rate of scavenging and how long carcasses persist on the beach.

"I am concerned about the environment and am glad to help see if there is a problem cropping up," said volunteer beach-walker Mary Porter-Solberg, 54, of Sequim.

A member of the Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society, she, too, was getting her first lessons in looking for and processing dead birds May 28 at

Hobuck Beach.

Volunteers must attend a training session to learn how to look for dead seabirds and learn proper techniques for measuring and placing color coded tags on birds for identification.

They measure the birds with a ruler, use a chalkboard to identify the location, place color-coded identification tags on the carcasses and photograph the animals.

Volunteers attempt to identify bird species by using a special field guide developed by program officials.

They are asked to select a beach and complete bird surveys once a month, at about the same time each month.

Volunteers are instructed to leave the birds where they found them.

Information they gather is sent to Sanctuary scientists and officials at the University of Washington School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, where the project office is located, for analysis.

Determining a bird's cause of death is not the sole focus of data collection most of the time, but volunteers do jot down their observations.

"Volunteers who have additional training and the correct permits have taken samples of birds and marine mammals for us so we could conduct additional studies," Brancato said.

Other uses for survey information include illustrating what occurs during major storms.

When a winter storm hit during 2002, hundreds of migrating red phalaropes washed up on the shores of outer coastal beaches, Hass said.

The previous year, only two had been found by volunteers.

Presence of oil

The presence of oil on birds and entanglement can also provide insight in to human activities offshore.

"The San Juan Islands volunteers detected oil on six of the 16 beaches in late-August and mid-September last year, and over 90 pounds of oil was recovered," Hass said.

"Some oil traces also appeared at Dungeness Spit, but no oiled birds were found."

No cause was ever discovered for the oil spill, and the cleanup was swift because of the early detection.

And if the West Nile virus hits crow and other bird populations in the Northwest, volunteers could provide early insight into where it's occurring.

"We have found about six crows total since the program began," Hass said. "If we see that number rise over the next couple of years, it could be an indicator of the virus."

Mosquitoes carry the virus, and Hass said it is "highly unlikely" that volunteers could contract the illness from handling a dead bird stricken with the virus.

"Volunteers are required to wear gloves when handling

any dead bird," he said. "We maintain every precaution to eliminate the chance of getting any disease."

Data collected by the volunteers also can pinpoint migration patterns and indicators of breeding success, as well as insight into the health of threatened or endangered species.

Rare bird finds

Sometimes they see birds rarely seen on beaches.

For example, a mottled petrel was found — something that hasn't happened in Washington for 30 years.

Volunteers also report stranded and dead marine mammals to the proper agencies, which can help aid scientists with rescue and research.

"We want COASST to go on indefinitely, because only over the course of several years can you collect this type of information," Hass said.

"The longer it goes on, the better the ability to detect patterns."