

# Coastal areas suffer large seabird losses

U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists have found evidence that, in addition to losses suffered as a result of the oil spill, seabirds in Alaska's southern coastal areas could be suffering unusually large losses from natural causes this year.

In August, several hundred birds showing no visible signs of oiling were collected in the vicinity of Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula. Analyses of several of these birds sent to Texas A&M University indicated that oil was not a cause of death.

Other evidence of greater than normal natural mortality has been suggested by changing species composition of those birds which have been found dead, according to Dr. John Piatt of the Alaska Fish and Wildlife Research Center in Anchorage, an arm of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Some of the birds we have found in larger numbers recently — kittiwakes and shearwaters — are different species than those found in great numbers earlier in the summer," said Piatt. "We hardly lost any kittiwakes earlier this spring and summer. That's one indication that some of this later mortality may not have been from the oil."

Piatt points out that it is not uncommon for large numbers of birds to die of natural causes in a short time. In 1983, the same two species died in large numbers along a wide range of the Alaskan and Soviet Far East coastline during the same time of year.

That year in August, kittiwakes and shearwaters washed ashore by the hundreds in some areas. Many of the dead birds appeared emaciated, leading biologists to conclude that they had died of starvation.

As of the first week of September, more than 34,000 dead birds had been recovered from areas affected by the oil spill in efforts to assess the damage to birds as a result of the spill and to remove oily carcasses from the food chain. Those carcasses are being held in cold storage by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which will ultimately determine how many of those birds have been lost as a result of the oil spill and will estimate the total losses.

"It's been a bad year for Alaska's seabirds all around," said John G. Rogers, acting regional director for the Alaska Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "This higher than normal natural mortality will compound losses we've already suffered as a result of the oil spill."