

[From Summer 1997]

Assateague Island Mystery Spill

On Friday May 30, "tar balls" were noticed washing up on the Assateague Island beach at the Chincoteague Refuge; this oil was from an unknown source. The U. S. Coast Guard was notified immediately, responding from the Hampton Roads area within several hours. The spill was declared a federal project and given the name "the Assateague Island Mystery Spill." Industrial Marine Service, Inc., of Norfolk arrived at the scene at approximately 6:45 PM and began cleanup. The following areas were impacted with tar balls ranging in size from 1/8 of an inch to 1 1/2 feet across: the lower 5.5 miles of Assateague Island, including the piping plover nesting area on the Hook, the recreational beach (1 mile), the off road vehicle zone (1 1/2 miles), and 0.7 of a mile of the Wild Beach; Wallops Island, which is owned by NASA and administered as part of the Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuge; Metompkin Island which is owned by the Service and The Nature Conservancy; and Cedar Island which is owned by the Service and private individuals. Swimming and the off-road vehicle zone were temporarily closed during the cleanup operations.



Of particular concern was the possible impact to nesting piping plovers, as this spill hit at the height of the nesting season with active nests on the Hook, Wallops, Assawoman, Metompkin, and Cedar Islands. Following intensive monitoring, five of the piping plovers on Assawoman Island were noticed having some amounts of oil on their breasts; four were considered lightly oiled and one moderately oiled.

Several sanderlings and oyster catchers were also seen with some oiling. Tri-State Bird Rescue was put on alert on the Friday evening of the spill and they have provided valuable information. After consultation with numerous parties, the decision was made not to try and catch any birds, since the trauma of handling may have been more detrimental than the oil itself.

Close monitoring of the affected birds was initiated. However, a northeast storm hampered operations. Of the ten plover nests on Assawoman, six were lost to overwash, two hatched, and two are still being incubated.



News media, including two television stations and numerous newspapers including the Washington Post, covered this event closely. The cleanup of the oiled areas, which was accomplished by hand crews, was declared complete around noon on Thursday, June 5.

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