

For Creative Minds

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Preventing Oil Spills & Helping Animals

People hearing “oil spill” usually think of an oil pipeline that breaks or a rig or ship spewing black, shiny oil that floats across water and onto the land. While that is one kind of oil spill, other fuels and even cooking oil can quickly spread across water and the shores. Any kind of oil spill can hurt animals that live in and near water. Oil ruins animals’ ability to insulate or waterproof themselves. Oil-covered animals become cold and waterlogged. They may swallow the oil, which makes them sick.



After an oil spill, trained responders come with tools to soak up, clean up, vacuum, and move the oil. How the oil is cleaned will depend on what kind of oil has spilled, how much there is, where the oil has spilled and the time of year.

Even in our own homes, we can help prevent oil spill problems by:

- Putting lids on items that contain any kind of oil or grease, even peanut butter, before we throw them away.
- Disposing of cooking oil the right way—let it cool and put it in a container with a lid.
- Never dumping any kind of oil outside or into the garbage or sewer.
- Checking and maintaining inside and outside oil tanks because they can rust and leak.
- Thinking about how we can use less oil, such as riding our bikes, walking or carpooling rather than taking our car.
- Remembering to turn off the lights and unplug electronic devices, like TVs and computers, when they are not in use. Using less electricity means using less oil.

Besides oil, trash can also hurt wildlife. How can you help animals stay free from pollution?

- When you see trash, pick it up and put it in a recycling bin or trash can with the lid on so that no animals will become tangled in it or take it back to their homes. Fishing line, kite strings, balloons, and plastic bags are especially dangerous trash.
- Rethink the ways you use plastic and reduce the amount of trash you produce. Pack your lunch in reusable containers rather than plastic bags. Use a reusable water bottle.
- Organize a clean-up day around your home or school.
- Ask your principal about a recycling program at your school if one isn’t already in place.

Wildlife Identification

Oil spills can affect every animal that lives in and near the water. Can you identify these animals that were helped at Tri-State?



Answers: 1. snake, 2. young goose, 3. horseshoe crab, 4. pelican, 5. gannet, 6. crayfish, 7. turtle

Q&A with Tri-State Executive Director Lisa Smith

How often do you rescue oiled animals?

We never know when oil spills will occur or if animals will be affected, so we remain ready all of the time.

What was the biggest spill that you've been involved in?

The 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico. We set up treatment centers in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. We cared for over 2,000 birds. Brown Pelicans were the most common patient.

What is the hardest animal to clean and why?

Each animal presents challenges. Pelicans can be tricky. They often get oil inside their pouches. That has to be carefully cleaned. Diving birds like loons have very dense feathers so it can take longer to wash them the right way. Diving birds are also hard to clean because they can't stand like geese and ducks. We put them in special cages where the bottom looks like a hammock. We work hard to get them clean and into pools as fast as possible.



What is the biggest animal you have helped? The smallest?

The biggest have been beavers and snapping turtles that weigh over 50 pounds! The smallest have been songbirds, tiny turtles, frogs, salamanders, and crayfish.

How much does it cost to care for oiled animals?

It depends on the circumstances but it is expensive. We need many experienced people but professional treatment increases the chances of the animals returning to the wild, so it's worth it. Other costs include:

- The right food, like fish for pelicans
- Medical supplies and safety equipment, such as special suits and gloves
- Getting rid of oily wastewater collected during washing
- Fuel to heat hot water for washing.



You want the animals in your care to stay as wild as possible so that they can be released. Do the animals get attached to you?

No, we try not to talk around them or to them. We make sure we never treat them like pets. We want them to go back to the wild where they belong.

How hard is it to catch animals affected by oil?

It depends on the type of oil and how much is on the animals. If the oil is heavy, like crude oil, the animals are often easy to catch. They can't fly or run away. If the oil is light, like diesel fuel, they can be hard to catch. They may still be able to fly or get away. Sometimes, we use special traps or cannon nets to catch oiled birds that can still fly.



Who cares for the animals?

Most of our staff have a background in biology or animal science. They have volunteered at Tri-State or worked in places like Tri-State. Our wildlife veterinarian has very special qualifications. Some staff members are veterinary technicians. Staff or volunteers who will be working with mammals (like raccoons) must have pre-exposure rabies vaccinations so they can safely handle these animals.

What is the best part of your job?

One is seeing how many people care about wildlife and how hard they will work to help them. The other is returning animals to their wild homes once their rehabilitation is complete.

What should I do if I find an oiled animal?

Call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Every wild animal is different.

If you aren't experienced in handling these animals, you could be hurt or they could be hurt. Oil can be dangerous for people. Don't touch it with your bare hands. Latex gloves will not protect you from some unsafe substances. If you see an oil spill, please call the National Response Center at (800) 424-8802.

