

Capture Guidelines for Oiled Birds and Terrestrial Wildlife During Oil Spill Responses

The purpose of these guidelines is to describe the methods and materials to safely capture live oiled wildlife. These guidelines apply to birds and terrestrial wildlife not addressed in other appendices and follow the [USFWS Best Practices for Migratory Bird Care during Oil Spill Response](#). Marine mammals, manatees, and sea turtles will be handled by existing stranding networks following their own collection protocols. If oiled wildlife is encountered follow the notification procedures for these species. Use Florida's Wildlife Alert Hotline **888-404-3922** until or unless another number is established for the event. Provide location (GPS coordinates) and contact information and remain on scene until a responder arrives.

The effective capture of oiled wildlife should be 1) swift, with minimal pursuit and noise, 2) use correct techniques, based on the species pursued and local conditions, and 3) minimize stress to the oiled animals. Knowing the species' natural history and behavior allows for a more successful capture while decreasing the stress. All responders must adhere to the *Best Management Practices for Protection of Florida's Coastal Wildlife* appendix to this contingency plan.

If the weather is warm, place captured animals in plastic pet kennels or a cardboard pet carrier and place the container in the shade. Kennels/carriers should not be left in the sun for more than 10 minutes when the air temperature is warm. During cold temperatures, keep kennels warm and away from drafts. Birds should be kept at temperatures no lower than 80°Fahrenheit, with around 90°F being optimal. Their body temperatures run at or near 104°F. Fill in the "Live Oiled Bird Form" according to the instructions on the back of the form. Place the form in a Ziploc baggie and attach it to the container. Ensure that each "Live Oiled Wildlife Form" stays with the associated animal. Transfer animals in cardboard pet carriers to plastic pet kennels before transporting (don't forget to transfer the form, too). During transport, if temperatures are warm, keep animals cool and shaded and when cold, keep them warm (between 80-90° F). Transport to the nearest wildlife stabilization center within 1 hour of capture (3 hours for areas requiring boat transportation). If several oiled animals are in the same area (e.g., colonial or flocking birds), and it may take over one hour for one person to capture all individuals and transport them, that person should contact and request assistance from other qualified persons immediately. Additional references can be found in the document produced by the US Fish and Wildlife Service "Best Practices for Migratory Bird Care During Oil Spill Response " available at: http://www.fws.gov/contaminants/OtherDocuments/best_practices.pdf

Steps for containered animals

- Ensure that container has been cleaned of potential infectious pathogens before use;
- Do not leave containers with animals unattended;
- Place containers in a safe and quiet location (e.g. away from noise and activity, above high tide-line);
- Place shade cloth or other breathable material that will allow air flow (important in hot weather for temperature regulation but also important to prevent toxic vapor build-up) over each container and to block the animals' view of people and hence lessen their stress levels;

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- Minimize temperature extremes (e.g. hot sun), ambient temperatures should ideally be kept around 90°Fahrenheit, no lower than 80°F and no higher than 100° F;
- Space containers adequately to ensure sufficient ventilation; and
- Keep containers away from oil vapors and other noxious substances.

Call the appropriate wildlife rehabilitation or stabilization center (see the Stabilization and Rehabilitation Centers Appendix) to let them know that you are bringing in an oiled animal. Or if necessary, call the nearest wildlife rehabilitation or stabilization center to request pickup and transport. If you are responding to a call and are unsuccessful in capturing the animal, report back to whoever dispatched you for additional instructions. Ensure that all reporting makes its way back to the Wildlife Branch of the Incident Command.

Upon taking animals to the rehabilitation or stabilization center, do not leave them unattended. Containers are to be handed over to a site worker immediately upon arrival to the rehabilitation or stabilization center. Convey to the rehabilitation or stabilization center worker in writing and orally, information about the animal's condition, the location it was found, etc.

Equipment for Oiled Wildlife Capture and Oiled Carcass Collection:

- PPE (Tyvek suit, nitrile gloves, safety glasses)
- Clipboard and datasheets (Live Oiled Wildlife Form, [Carcass Collection Form](#))
- Pens and pencils
- Plastic pet kennels
- Capture nets (long- and short-handled), Towels and Blankets may be used as well.
- Hand-held net launcher
- Multi-tool folding knife
- Duct tape
- Radios
- GPS unit (loaded with operational divisions and SCAT segment lat/longs, if possible)
- Maps/gazetteer or incident-specific maps or shoreline segment maps, if available
- Binoculars or Spotting Scope
- Digital camera
- Evidence identification tags, Form 3-2052 (blue)
- Carcass collection protocols
- Incident specific guidance of oiled bird capture
- Large paper bags
- Small paper bags
- Rubber bands or twist ties
- Evidence tape
- Marking supplies (spray paint and/or flagging) for marine mammal carcasses
- Absorbent pads and rags and/or towels

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- Suitable Personal Identification (Drivers License, Incident Command ID, Professional Identification)
- HAZWOPER Training (24 hr) Wallet Certificate (needed for access to “hot zones”)

All groups of five or more non-oiled dead birds should be entered into the bird mortality database (<http://myfwc.com/bird>).

Oiled Birds

Oil contaminated birds that are captured or collected by appropriately trained field teams may require stabilization in the field before being transported to an off-site rehabilitation facility. Field stabilization is provided to oiled birds that cannot be moved immediately and are likely to remain in the field longer than 2-3 hours. Field stabilization is a “first-aid” method, rendered only by trained personnel, for administering temporary care and initial treatment to quickly mitigate the effects of oiling on birds soon after capture. Field stabilization techniques include clearing mouth, nostrils and eyes of oil, regulating temperature, and treating for dehydration. These field treatments will increase the oiled bird’s chances for successful cleaning, rehabilitation and eventual release.

General Rules for determining what birds should be captured

Generally speaking, oil “smudged” feathers of surface feeding birds (i.e., gulls) do not typically put a bird at risk of hypothermia or hyperthermia. A general rule is that if the oil has penetrated the feathers to the skin and impairs the birds’ waterproofing capability, then the bird may be vulnerable. However, surface smudging does not impair waterproofing. The following can be used as a guide for birds throughout Florida.

Evaluating unusual or stress-induced behavior of spotty oiled birds

Oiled birds that are experiencing wetness to the skin or discomfort will likely focus on intensely preening oiled feathers. This is an indication that they are in some level of distress. If a bird with obvious oil on its feathers is observed exhibiting consistent preening behavior, then capture should be attempted.

Important: Remember that all birds preen on and off throughout the day. The indication of stressed behavior is intensive preening focused on an obvious oiled area.

Surface-Feeding Birds (*gulls, skimmers, coots, gallinules, dabbling ducks, white pelicans*)

These species will often get spots of oil on their feathers during oil spills that generally do not pose a threat. If they are seen with large amounts of oil that covers any feathered area approximating 10% or more of the entire body, then they should be captured. If these birds are not exhibiting intense preening behavior, then these birds should be left in the field.

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Diving Birds (*cormorants, anhingas, diving ducks*)

These birds are highly vulnerable to hypothermia when oiled. Any of these species sighted with obvious oil on them should be captured. Oil may be difficult to identify on these dark-feathered species. The bird's behavior may indicate their need for cleaning. If these birds are spotted obsessively preening or showing signs of heat stress ("panting") or hypothermia (shivering and lethargy), they should be captured. In Florida, "panting" (also known as gular fluttering) is a common behavior that keeps these species cool in the heat of the day. Diving birds that "pant" yet are still capable of evading capture are not likely oiled or in distress. These animals should be left in the field.

Plunge-Diving Birds (*brown pelicans, gannets, terns*)

These species run the risk of getting wet and waterlogged when plunging for fish if they have oil on their feathers. General guidance is that if 10% of their feathers (or more) are wet to the skin, then they should be captured. If these birds are spotted obsessively preening or showing signs of heat stress ("panting") or hypothermia (shivering and lethargy), they should be captured. In Florida, "panting" (also known as gular fluttering) is a common behavior that keeps these species cool in the heat of the day. Plunge-Diving birds that "pant" yet are still capable of evading capture are likely not oiled or in distress. These animals should be left in the field.

Small Shorebirds (*sandpipers*)

Small sandpipers are highly vulnerable to hypothermia and predation once they become oiled and weak. Oil on their feet and legs tends to get smeared on belly feathers and can impair their waterproofing capability. This is not always evident when viewing them through binoculars. Any shorebird with a spot of oil (dime-sized or larger) that has clearly penetrated the feathers to the skin should attempt to be captured. Birds with small spots of surface smudging, and not exhibiting signs of distress, should be left in the field.

Large Wading Birds (*herons, egrets, spoonbills, ibis*)

If the body is oiled over 10% of the total body area, then capture should be attempted. Large wading birds need to be captured if over 20% of their body area is oiled. Many of these birds will get oil on their legs and tips of their wings and tail feathers. They are usually flighted and if they are capable of evading capture by flying away they are most likely okay and should be left in the field.

Group Capture (e.g., nets, noose mats, towels, blankets)

Birds should be transported for care only if they are contaminated with oil, have clear loss of waterproofing capability (i.e., due to dispersants), or appear ill or injured (expressing clear signs of distress). If non-oiled birds are captured in the process of capturing oiled birds, they should be released

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immediately. This is important because of the high risk of hyperthermia in transporting birds in hot and humid conditions.

If possible, send written information with birds that are unusual. If one bird in a group is clearly different from the rest of the group, provide that information on the transport cage.

If capturing birds in a group, it is important that proper field techniques are used (appropriate for the species and conditions). Capture should occur early to avoid the heat of the day. It is essential to minimize the chase time (use hand held launchers if available), pay close attention to the bird's behavior when captured, and place birds in a cool location as soon as possible when working in hot weather.

All personnel should be experienced with the species being captured and the equipment that is being used. Nets need to be appropriate for the species being captured, with particular consideration for weight of the net and diameter of the net mesh. Towels or blankets may also be used for capture if appropriate nets are not available. Hazards must be clearly identified to avoid incidental take.

If a cannon net (or other flock-sized net) is employed, captured birds should immediately be covered with landscaping cloth or other shade cloth to protect them from heat and sun and to reduce stress, even in cooler temperatures. Oiled or injured birds should be removed from the net first, but all birds should be removed quickly and either released (if non-oiled and healthy) or placed in keeping cages. No bird should be left in a net without a shade cloth (landscaping cloth) covering it.

Exception: Birds in nesting groups should not be captured without approval of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Approaching and Taking Birds from Nesting Colonies

Disturbances in and around bird nesting colonies largely fall into one of the following four categories: SCAT teams, cleanup crews, NRDA/studies, and low level over-flights by reconnaissance crews and media/VIP tours. All flights over any colonial-nesting bird sites should be avoided. At a minimum, altitude of the aircraft should be maintained above 500 feet, unless otherwise specified by the Resource Manager.

The guidance below should be used to direct the work of SCAT teams, cleanup crews, and NRDA/studies approaching beach or mangrove colonial-nesting and wading bird areas by boat and/or on foot.

Potential impacts of human entry are significant. Many species of coastal waterbirds nest directly on the ground, and have highly camouflaged eggs and chicks that may be accidentally stepped on or driven over during rescue or cleanup efforts. Eggs and chicks are often shaded by the parental birds, and so are left vulnerable to heat exposure when the parents are disturbed and frightened away from the area. Eggs and young chicks may be displaced from nests by the parental birds as they attempt to flee, and older chicks may leave nests on their own. By contrast, in an undisturbed state, parental birds are

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careful not to displace eggs and chicks. Predators may also be attracted to the area by human presence, scent, or forced movement of the birds.

When no oil is seen in or clearly around a colony, colonies **shall not** be entered for any reason, except in the case of a human emergency (**there should be no exceptions for SCAT teams and cleanup crews**).

To minimize unnecessary disturbances to birds, observations for potential oil impacts on colonies should be made at an appropriate distance from the colony while also determining if any birds are showing signs of oil exposure (consult the appropriate FWC/USFWS personnel and/or land manager, for guidance on such distances, but a useful “rule of thumb” is if the birds appear agitated by your presence you are too close for their comfort and you should back up.). If oil is detected on multiple birds within the colony, consult the local land manager and/or appropriate FWC/USFWS personnel to determine appropriate times to enter the colony to recover birds. During the hotter months of the nesting season, the best time of day to recover a few individuals from a colony without unduly impacting the other nesters is early in the morning or in the evening, when sun exposure is less of a threat.

Birds should not be recovered from a colony when less than 33% of chicks and adult birds are visibly oiled. When over 33% of chicks and adults appear oiled, the local land manager and/or appropriate FWC/USFWS personnel should be consulted to determine whether attempts to capture oiled birds can be made, while minimizing disturbance and potential injury. Considerations should include the time of day (morning is typically best unless it is cold or raining), stage of nesting (older chicks are more likely to survive than younger chicks), number of available personnel to attempt captures, and time needed to attempt captures.

It is important to register information about each nesting site surveyed in a GIS database so that as staff rotates through position assignments, important location and status details are not lost. This can help to ensure that disturbances can be minimized during potential capture attempts as well as helping to inform the Wildlife Branch and the Incident Command on significant field wildlife capture situations (colonial nesting colonies impacted). This is particularly important in the NRDA process if the species impacted are threatened and/or endangered.

Transportation of Captured Birds

Transport Containers

1. A transport container must provide enough room for the animal to comfortably turn its body around while only gently brushing against the walls. More than one bird of social species (gulls, shorebirds, pelicans) can be housed together in one container (see guidance below) but caution should be made to not overcrowd them, as they can quickly overheat if ventilation is not adequate.

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2. Each transport container must have sufficient ventilation (i.e., air must be able to pass through) so that noxious oil toxins and body heat can escape. This typically means that airflow can pass through from one side to the other.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: In hot weather, birds should NOT be transported in cardboard boxes

Plastic Pet Kennels

Plastic pet kennels (large size) can hold large and small birds. Plastic pet kennels are the container of choice because they are very sturdy, easy to clean and come in a variety of sizes. The cage should be sized appropriately to the bird and allow the animal to stand and turn a full circle within the confines of the kennel. All cages must have (non-frayed) towels, absorbent pads or rags placed in the bottom of them to provide cushioning for the bird, to absorb fecal matter, and to help prevent slipping. Each container should contain only one bird unless otherwise determined by qualified, experienced, personnel. If necessary, some gregarious birds of compatible species may be placed two or three to an appropriate-sized container, including ducks, mergansers, terns, and some shorebirds. Individuals of compatible species should be strong, stable, and equally affected by the oil. Containers must be checked within 5 minutes after placing birds together to ensure compatibility.

In the event that multiple individuals of species are placed in the same container, the following guidelines are provided for the **maximum** number of individuals by taxon per large kennel:

Gulls, skimmers, terns	4
Pelicans	2
Shorebirds	8
Cormorants	2
Large herons	1
Small herons	3
Coots, gallinules	6
Gannets	1

Note:

When transporting birds in vehicles in hot weather, the vehicle temperature must be regulated at 90°F at all times, with plenty of airflow to prevent overheating. However, oiled birds may be more susceptible to hypothermia so care should be taken not to chill them.

Chicks should not be transported with adult birds unless they are from the same nest or brood.