

Delta National Wildlife Refuge

and the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill

Refuge Facts

- Established: 1935.
- Acres: 48,800.
- Located in Lower Plaquemines Parish, LA. Nearest town is Venice, LA. Refuge sub-headquarters are located in Venice. Actual refuge location is seven miles south of Venice. Access is by boat only. It requires traveling and crossing the Mississippi River.

Natural History

Refuge is a dynamic landscape that is part of the currently active delta of the Mississippi River. Formation of what is now the refuge began in mid 1800's at Cubit's Gap. Refuge was established as a bird sanctuary. An abundance of ducks, geese, raptors, wading birds, shorebirds, and several bird rookeries are on the Refuge. Refuge is composed of fresh-to-brackish marsh habitat nurtured by rich Mississippi River sediments.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- Approximately 7500 visitors in fiscal 2009.

Refuge Purposes

- Provide wintering habitat and sanctuary for waterfowl and other migratory birds.
- To protect and enhance endangered species.
- To restore and preserve marshland habitat.
- To provide compatible consumptive and non-consumptive public use.

The Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill

On April 20, 2010 a drilling rig explosion led to uncontrolled leaking of oil into the Gulf of Mexico in the vicinity of Delta NWR. The federal government, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with state and local governments and private citizens, are working to limit the impact to coastal ecosystems along the northern Gulf of Mexico.



Workers place absorbent boom on Delta NWR, photo by USFWS/Drew Wirwa.

Questions and Answers

What are the public use impacts of the spill at Delta NWR?

A portion of the refuge is closed due to an earlier, unrelated pipeline rupture that occurred in early April. The remainder of the refuge is open.

What are the immediate threats to the Refuge and its wildlife?

There is potential for oil damage to marsh vegetation. The areas most likely to be impacted are outer fringes of the Refuge which border the Gulf of Mexico. Interior marsh areas are more protected, and benefit from outflows of water from the Mississippi River which tend to push oil away. External marshes are composed mainly of Roseau cane (phragmites) which grows in deeper waters and is less prone to root damage from oil. Interior marshes contain important food plants such as delta duck potato and three-square which are relied upon by many waterfowl and wading bird species. These marshes could be seriously impacted in the event of a large storm event that pushed oil deeper into the refuge. If marsh vegetation dies, erosion can occur rapidly as these plants hold the marsh together.

Beached oil or oil sheen on the water can impact wildlife. Oil on birds can decrease their feathers' waterproofing and even small amounts of fresh oil if ingested can kill the birds. Weathered oil is less of a threat as volatile compounds diminish with exposure to the elements. Birds that dive for aquatic foods are especially at risk because they can easily get coated with oil.

Oil on the eggs of nesting birds can coat and suffocate the developing chicks inside - even a light coating of oil can kill developing eggs. If chicks are exposed to oil they are more impacted than adults due to their lack of well-developed protective feathers.

What are some of the bird species potentially at risk on Delta NWR?

Secretive marsh birds such as rails, gallinules, and moorhens are nesters on the refuge. Egrets nest in taller willows along the banks of waterways. Resident waterfowl species currently nesting on the refuge include mottled ducks and black-bellied whistling ducks. Many other species of migrating ducks and geese winter on Delta Refuge, and will begin arriving this fall.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

If oil is present then, there is potential for great impact to these wintering birds.

What are some tools that the refuge is using to deal with the oil spill?

Staff continuously monitors for presence of oil. Both hard and soft boom is used to keep oil away from the marshes. Absorbent boom is used to collect oil that reaches land. As the exterior Roseau cane marshes are less susceptible to oiling damage, some booms have been pulled further in to protect more vulnerable interior marshes.

Hotlines

To report oiled or injured wildlife:
866/557 1401

Media inquiries:

Joint Information Center:
985/902 5231 and 985/902 5240

To report claims related to damages:
800/440 0858

To volunteer:
866/448 5816

For more information about the Service's response and our resources at risk:

<http://www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill>

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Hard boom and absorbent boom require frequent monitoring to ensure effectiveness, photo by USFWS/Drew Wirwa.

