

BP oil spill: Endangered species still at risk

Deepwater Horizon spill in US leads to rise in dolphins and endangered brown pelicans injured or killed this week

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Deepwater Horizon: US officials say the BP oil spill has resulted in a rise in the number of brown pelicans killed or injured in the past week. Photograph: Bevil Knapp/EPA

US officials recorded a big jump in the numbers of dolphins and endangered brown pelican and sea turtle injured or killed by the BP spill over the past week, even as officials were proclaiming that the oil was rapidly disappearing from the Gulf.

Some 1,020 sea turtles were caught up in the spill, [according to figures](#) (pdf) today – an ominous number for an endangered species. Wildlife officials collected 177 sea turtles last week – more than in the first two months of the spill and a sizeable share of the 1,020 captured since the spill began more than three months ago. Some 517 of that total number were dead and 440 were covered in oil, according to figures maintained the Deepwater Horizon response team.

"It is a high number for any endangered species," said Elizabeth Wilson, a scientist for the Oceana conservation group. The number of dolphins, whales and other marine mammals captured or found dead also rose last week, from 69 to 76. An analysis by the National Wildlife Federation said the numbers of oiled birds collected had nearly doubled since the well was capped, from 37 to 71 a day.

It is unclear why the numbers of injured and dead wildlife have jumped. One official at the Deepwater Horizon response command claimed that the rescue effort had intensified over recent days, but did not provide numbers for increased crew.

Others suggested that oil was moving into wildlife habitats, or that [animals](#) initially exposed to smaller quantities of oil were sickening over time.

Conservation groups also accused wildlife officials of misjudging their earlier rescue efforts and putting some at risk species – such as the brown pelican – in greater danger.

Wildlife officials had earlier held back from visiting islands in Barataria Bay that are sanctuaries for brown pelican for fear of disrupting their nesting season.

But that concern to avoid disturbing habitat may have put pelican eggs and hatchlings at greater risk once able-bodied pelican fled the oil.

"There has been a lot of criticism of fish and wildlife for the fact that they never actually went on the islands, and because they did not, abandoned nests were left so that any chicks that were already hatched died, and any eggs that were left were also left to die," said Cynthia Sarthou executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network.