

Assessing Hurricane Sandy's Impact on Wildlife

Conservation Partnerships at Work in New Jersey

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When Hurricane Sandy pushed ashore in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. last month, it left a clear path of destruction - homes, roadways, and human lives were lost as a result of the powerful storm. Less visible was the impact the storm had on coastal wildlife and their habitats.

Assessing impacts to wildlife is always a difficult task; many migratory songbirds and shorebirds likely perished and will never be seen. Furthermore, some changes to wildlife habitat and the environment will not become apparent for years to come.

Nonetheless, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) has already begun to mobilize its resources to help gauge impacts of the storm. A Hurricane Sandy Wildlife Response Fund has been established to conduct rapid habitat assessments. In the meantime, because of long-standing close partnerships in the region, some on-the-ground work was immediately possible.



Stephanie Egger, CWFNJ Wildlife Biologist, surveying American Oystercatchers after Hurricane Sandy.

In New Jersey, ground zero for the storm, the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey (CWFNJ) was on the beaches within days after the storm to begin evaluating impacts to breeding and roosting habitat for American Oystercatcher, Piping Plovers, and other at-risk shorebird species. And thanks to NFWF support administered through the Conoco-Phillips Spirit of Conservation fund, CWFNJ was already conducting surveys of migratory flocks of oystercatcher as part of a multi-year grant.

Surveys conducted immediately before and after the storm revealed nearly the same number (~ 950) of oystercatchers roosting in southern New Jersey coastal inlets at both times. Color-band resighting of a subset of oystercatchers further suggested these were the same birds as before the storm. From these results we can assume there was little or no direct mortality to oystercatchers as a result of the storm.

The oystercatcher surveys also provided an opportunity for CWFNJ staff to complete preliminary qualitative assessments of the condition of beaches and inlets after the storm with an eye on how those habitats will support beach nesting birds next spring. The jury is still out – in some cases the storm scoured dune systems creating sparsely vegetated overwash habitat and blowouts, highly desired by nesting birds, but in other areas it significantly eroded critical inlet nesting habitat. We now have to wait until the spring when shorebirds return to our beaches to nest to assess their response to the habitat changes.

This is just a small piece of the larger question of how Hurricane Sandy impacted various coastal species and their habitat across the region. NFWF and CWFNJ, and a network of partners, will continue to assess those impacts, both short and long-term, moving forward.