

REPORT ON THE NUMBERS OF OILED BIRDS FOUND DEAD ON THE COAST  
OF THE NETHERLANDS, 1948 - 1958.

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In 1955 the "Institute for Nature Conservation Research (R.I.V.O.N.)" at Bilthoven (Netherlands) made an attempt to calculate the numbers of oiled birds found dead along the coast of the Netherlands during the period 1948 to 1958. For that purpose it started an inquiry in cooperation with the "Netherlands Society for the Protection of Birds" at Amsterdam. Organised counts were undertaken on different places along the Dutch coast and careful observations were made on the numbers of the oil-victims as well as on the species to which they belonged. These ~~counts~~ <sup>counts</sup> were carried out for the most part by amateur-ornithologists, chiefly members of naturalists-societies and by the staff-ornithologists of the R.I.V.O.N. Forms were used to make the informations as uniform as possible in order to facilitate comparison.

In the years 1956-1958 regular counts (i.e. nearly every month), however, were made at a few places only. This happened to be on the Wadden-islands and in 1956 along the coast of Holland (Den Helder to Hook-of-Holland). In 1957-1958 the counts along the last-named coast were made less regularly, as was also the case on the islands of Zeeland (Deltaplan-area).

The results of all these counts are given in Schedule 1. In this schedule only oil-victims are mentioned, not the many other birds which were also found dead on the beach. These other birds, which could have died from parasites, hunger and cold, or which were drowned in the sea and washed ashore (as in the case of many migratory passerines), sometimes outnumbered the oil-victims. Especially during periods of severe frost (February-March 1956) hundreds of divers, ducks, scoters etc. were found dead on the beach without the slightest contamination with oil.

The results of the counts are worked out in Schedule 1 in such a way that no birds were counted twice. The numbers therefor give an idea how many oiled birds at least died in the years

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1948-1958 on the Dutch coast on the kilometers mentioned for each month.

There are interesting differences in the species and also in the numbers of oiled birds between the northern parts (Wadden islands) and the more southern parts of the coast (coast of Holland annex islands of Zeeland) e.g. Scoters, Eider and Red-breasted Merganser are more plentiful on the Waddenislands, the Razorbill is more common on the southern coasts. These differences, however, are not worked out here.

The fact that the counts were made rather irregularly and that for instance not the same area was visited every week or month, made it difficult to calculate the total numbers of birds washed ashore month after month. The average numbers per kilometer calculated per month, however, give some hold, especially for those months during which relatively many kilometers have been counted.

Reckoning with these average numbers (Schedule 1, last line) and a total length of the Dutch seacoast of about 400 km at least 15 000 to 17 000 birds died every year on this coast during the period 1948-1958.

Till now we have not taken into account the oil-contaminate seabirds from the North Sea that seek shelter in the Waddensea or which drift through the outlets between the Waddenislands into this area. Their number is not to be neglected as from the east-respective south-coast of some Waddenislands even exceptionally high figures, e.g. 20 and 30 oiled birds per kilometer, are known. Such concentrations, however, might only be local. And the same applies more or less to the estuaries of the rivers Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt in the Deltaplan-area.

In any case the total number of oil-victims per year on the Dutch coast as a whole will be much higher than 15 000 to 17 000 birds; it may be probably about 20 000 birds. This number still must be looked at as a minimum, as the average number of birds found per month normally will be lower than the total number of oiled birds coming ashore per month.

Many observers had their own experience that birds can be covered by or even completely buried in the shifting sand within a few

a few days after they were washed ashore by a high tide. On the other hand during summer mummified birds (half buried in the sand) can be found on the higher parts of the beach, which certainly came ashore already months ago. That catastrophes can play an important part in oil pollution is evident from the high figure for the Common Scoter in March (see Schedule 1 under Melanitta nigra).

Without special investigations it is impossible to tell with which factor the average number must be multiplied to get the real number of oilvictims per kilometer per month.

The author's personal impression is, that from September-April this factor might be 2 or even 3 and in the period April - September 1 or less than 1. This supposition self-evidently must be checked.

The conclusion, however, is that the total numbers of oiled birds on the Dutch coast is estimated at a minimum of 20 000 birds a year and a maximum of perhaps 50 000 birds.

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