



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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Report # B-7: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, February 2020.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) submits the following summary of our activities related to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

I. Migratory Bird Management

Update on the 2019 Alaska Seabird Mortality Events and Monitoring

From late May to August 2019, the Service and partners documented higher than normal rates of dead and dying seabirds washing up on beaches in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. Reports included observations of weak short-tailed shearwaters attempting to feed from salmon gillnets in nearshore waters of Bristol Bay. Puffins, murres, and auklets were also reported dead on beaches, but at much lower numbers than shearwaters.

Coordinating with Federal, State, and Tribal partners, the Service submitted 43 seabird carcasses to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC; Madison, Wisconsin) for examination and testing for infection and non-infectious disease and determination of cause of death. During examination, tissue samples were collected and sent to the USGS Alaska Science Center (Anchorage, Alaska), to test for the presence of saxitoxin and domoic acid, two biotoxins associated with harmful algal blooms. Results of the NWHC necropsies and the USGS Alaska Science Center analyses for biotoxins concluded that nearly all birds died of starvation. The exception was a localized die off in southeast Alaska, where Arctic tern adults and chicks died and four chicks tested positive for saxitoxin, a biotoxin associated with paralytic shellfish poisoning. No evidence of disease as a cause of death has been detected.

Historically, seabird die-offs have occurred occasionally in Alaska; however, large die-off events have occurred annually since 2015. The Service continues to coordinate with partners, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team, Alaska Sea Grant, National Park Service, USGS, Alaska Migratory Bird Co-management Council, and Tribal Councils. Together, we monitor the geographic extent, duration, and magnitude of these die-offs and contribute those data to parallel efforts to monitor unusual mortality events of marine mammals in Alaska. A recent publication resulting from these collaborations (<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0226087>) concluded that the large die off of common murres in 2015/2016, in the Gulf of Alaska and farther south, was primarily due to lack of sufficient prey, linked to the warm water anomaly known as 'the blob'. This story was

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headlined in national and local newspapers, including the Alaska Daily News
(<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/science/2020/01/15/pacific-seabird-die-off-linked-to-a-warm-water-blob-study-says/>)

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