



Urban Wildlife Issues  
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried  
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

## March 2006 – Wildlife Column

We Canadians consume close to 114 million US gallons of crude oil and crude oil products every day. To put that in perspective, you would need about 14,000 gallons to fill up your average living room.

We are, of course, an oil producing country. About 22 percent of North America's crude oil and natural gas comes from Canada; however we consume only 10 percent of that. The largest crude reserves are in the Middle East. The upshot is that crude does a great deal of moving around, on land and over the sea. Accidents happen and when they do, we call it an oil spill.

We are all familiar with the Exxon Valdez-type oil spill. In 1989 the Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska and spilled 11 million gallons of crude. (Equivalent to 797 living rooms.) It was a horrible natural disaster and one we hope will never be repeated.

Not many people are aware that most spills are far smaller and many of them happen on land. They can be equally damaging to wildlife. The weekly Incident Report from the BC Government for January 30 to February 5 2006, reported 87 dangerous goods and oil spills. And those are the ones we know about.

Two weeks ago, near Burnaby Lake, we had our own little oil spill. A truck was involved in an accident near the Bill Copeland arena and diesel spilled into a ditch. Clean up crews were on the job right away, and managed to contain most of the oil; the remnants found their way into Still Creek and hence to Burnaby Lake. Soon residents and joggers were reporting sheen on the Lake (a thin layer of oil on the water).

The implications for waterfowl and many others encountering oil are not good. Water runs off a duck's back because its top layer of feathers overlap like tiles on a roof, and strands with tiny hooks (called barbs) further interlock the feathers forming a tight waterproof weave. Oil clogs the barbs and water can penetrate and soak the downy feathers underneath. As the bird struggles to maintain its body temperature, it will burn its fat reserves and eventually die of hypothermia. Oil on a bird need be no bigger than your thumb nail to do its dirty work.

However oil kills in other ways too.

Birds can drown from the sheer weight of the additional oil and loss of air usually trapped in the feathers. The oil can also poison them because their initial reaction to dirty feathering will be to try and clean themselves. Depending on the type of oil product, its ingestion can cause damage to liver, lungs, kidney or intestines, and other internal organs.

Not a pretty picture. Sadly there are likely birds dealing with the remnants from the Burnaby Lake spill, right now. Residents have seen waterfowl land in, and immediately take off from, the area where there is oil. It is very likely that these birds will be damaged and chances of survival, without help, will be poor.

WRA is, unfortunately, an old hand at oil spill rehabilitation. In 1985 we treated 52 oiled birds. That was the first of many rehabilitation oil spill responses. Last year our Team Leader, Jackie Ward, was a senior member of a group working to rehabilitate critters near Lake Wabamun in Alberta. The spill happened last August when a CN Rail train was derailed and spilled bunker fuel.

Oil removal is intensive work, and it is very stressful to the birds, which often view us as predators. Trained rehabilitators will sometimes have to give birds as many as 20 baths, using a special cleaning solution. Then the birds will have to be carefully observed and fed to ensure they are ready for release.

Prevention is of course the best cure. The fewer spills, the less harm to our wild neighbours. Please call your local municipality if you see what appears to be an oil spill. And be careful about throwing out unused oil products, even cooking oil. They can damage birds and harm fur-bearing mammals.

As you read this column, baby birds and mammals are being born all over the Lower Mainland. Let's give them a clean, safe start to life and manage our by-products carefully. Treat yourself and your neighbourhood. The next time you need to wash the car, or change the oil, take it to the garage. Runoff from the street usually flows straight into local waterways, potentially devastating fish, birds and mammals.