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An Alaskan Tragedy

by James R. Bauman III
AFA Alaska State Coordinator
Anchorage, Alaska

*"Your children — my children —
in their lifetime will never know
Prince William Sound as it was on
March 23, 1989."*

Dr. James Scott

The pigeon guillemot flapped his way into the air and flew inches above the surface of the water near Bligh Reef. He was small as shore birds go — drab and awkward. He wasn't really going anywhere but the urge to mate and have chicks had given him a vibrant energy. As he moved along, he didn't notice when the translucent emerald water just below changed to the viscous black color of death. The small, reddish orange webbed feet reached down towards the surface, but instead of an awkward splash the sound was more like a rock striking very wet mud. Immediately panic struck. The little bird tried at full speed to push with his feet and become airborne again, and gather enough wind beneath his wings to pull clear of this lethal goo. With his heart pounding he fell back. He could no longer see, his eyes now covered by this substance so tenacious it would not blink away. His chest heaved as he sucked in the fatal gasses which caused the vessels of his lungs and airsacs to burst, and finally to cause the heart to stop beating. With his death the little guillemot had become one of the early statistics in the largest oil spill in United States history.

Prince William Sound, even by Alaska standards, is a place of awesome beauty — ten thousand square miles of crystalline water dotted by islands, bays and fjords. It is surrounded by jagged glaciers and mountains with waterfalls everywhere cascading down to a salty sea. In this estuary all the ingredients for life are present. Phytoplankton and small crustaceans multiply at an incredible rate, and are consumed by salmon fry and other small marine creatures. These, in turn, are devoured by even larger animals right on up the line. Everywhere in the sound you can find killer whales and dolphins in family groups cruising just offshore.

There are seals and sealions either playing in the surf or, on sunny days, just stretched out on a beach rock soaking up the sun's rays. A mother sea otter floats on her back with two pups swimming in close proximity. She is feeding them pieces of a crab she holds on her chest. There is a flat rock balanced on her stomach and she smacks the crab against this to tear it apart. The little group shares the bay with resident seabirds; marbled murrelets, cormorants, kittiwakes, murre and puffins and also the waterfowl who dive for their sea-food; the scoters, mergansers and Canadian geese. Overhead a female bald eagle heads toward her nest. Her mate swoops to the surface of the bay and snatches a four-pound fish that has dallied too close to the surface. To be here is like living in a dream. On Good Friday, March 24, 1989, at 12:06 a.m., the dream became a nightmare.

On this hazy morning, Captain Joseph Hazlewood, the skipper of the *Exxon Valdez*, known to be an environmental activist himself, turned over the control of this huge ship to a third mate. Shortly thereafter, the ship went aground Bligh Reef, a reef clearly marked on all marine charts and well outside the shipping channel. Oil began bubbling from the massive holes in the tanker's hull and spread slowly across the ocean. Containment booms were put out but broke repeatedly in the strong current. For the first couple of days the slick covered an area of only five to ten square miles. This was the time something had to be done or it would be too late. There was supposed to be a contingency plan. The oil companies had agreed to this twelve years before when the oil had started to flow but equipment had been moved and other equipment was not working as planned. Everyone began pointing fingers and shifting the

blame. The Coast Guard said Exxon was not doing anything, and Exxon countered by stating they had tried to begin using dispersants but the Coast Guard would not permit their use. Additional tankers began unloading the thirty million gallons of fuel still remaining aboard the stricken ship. By March 28 the wind was up to 30 knots and the ten million gallons that had spilled was on the move. First it struck Smith Island, and then Naked Island, leaving a layer of lethal slime from 10 to 20 inches deep on all of the beaches. Biologists checked one stretch of beach less than four miles long and found 500 birds dead, their bodies covered totally in oil, flattened from the weight of it as though they had been stepped on. The twisted, dead bodies of sea otters began to show up in ever increasing numbers. The slick now covered 1,000 square miles and from the air it looked like a huge, brown chocolate mousse surrounded by a magenta, blue-green sheen like you would see in a puddle with gasoline floating on top. It had destroyed the beaches of: Green, Evans, Knight, Eleanor, Storey, and Ingot Islands and was still moving. Kenneth Rohl, the judge who set Captain Hazlewood's original bail at one million dollars, said, "We have a man-made destruction that has not been equaled, probably, since Hiroshima."

In Valdez, the terminus for the Trans Alaska Pipeline, there was a major convergence. Representatives of every environmental group known to man were there. Journalists both local and from around the world were spending huge sums of money to hire helicopters to fly them out to one of the islands so they could walk in the goo, and get a picture of an oil-soaked bird. There were Exxon people, Coast Guard people, Alaska Fish & Game, Federal Fish & Game, and the National Transit Safety Board each trying to do what they could and everyone stepping on each other's toes. All were worried about the ten million migrating shorebirds now arriving in increasing numbers driving the body count higher and higher.

Early in April, Exxon hired International Bird Rescue. Shortly a bird and otter cleaning station was set up in Valdez, and a few weeks later one was set up in Seward, Alaska. The animals being brought in were usually so far gone there was little that could be done. The "save" rate for the otters

was very low. An otter, unlike other marine mammals, has no layer of subcutaneous fat. It depends on its thick fur for warmth and buoyancy and it doesn't take very much oil to break down this system causing the animals to die of hypothermia. As for the birds, it only takes about a thimbleful of crude oil on even a big bird like a loon or a cormorant and they will either drown or become hypothermic. One worker reported a group of fulmars swimming about with only their heads and a small portion of their necks above the water. The rescue center now has 400 volunteers working 18 hours a day and they do seem to be making some headway. More and more birds are surviving. It takes 150 gallons of water to clean each bird but enough have been processed successfully that releases have taken place in untainted areas.

Perhaps the saddest of all are the bald eagles, those powerful creatures that are the symbol of our country. Bald eagles are rare in the rest of the United States but numerous in Prince William Sound. The picture that remains with most visitors is that of a bald eagle gracefully soaring on a thermal current of air near his nesting site. On a recent inspection flight, Dr. Pat Reddig, head of the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center, noticed 14 of the 20 eagles he observed had oil on some portion of their plumage. This agrees with estimates that up to 70 percent of the 5,000 eagles in the sound are contaminated. As of right now, the only eagles being helped are the ones so ill they can be easily captured. These birds are crated and sent to Anchorage. There they are picked up by Dr. Jim Scott, a local veterinarian and legendary bird rehabilitator, who has won numerous national awards for his work with raptors. At his office they are cleaned, tested, given shots, vitamins, and tube fed special nutrients. He has one eagle recuperating that he respects very much. The bird is known simply as number one. "That bird isn't afraid of anything," says Scott. "She was probably on the ground several days. She must have come up against moose, wolverines, and even bear, but she ran them all off."

Dr. Scott has been keeping the eagles in his clinic, but a new rehabilitation and research center is being built near the ocean which will be staffed by volunteers under his direction. An active capture program will be started, and any eggs recovered



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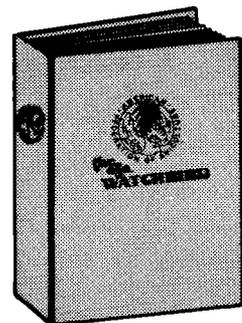
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Kodiak 3 partially cleaned.



Johnnie Gandolfo holds Kodiak 3 while Dr. Scott administers nutrients.

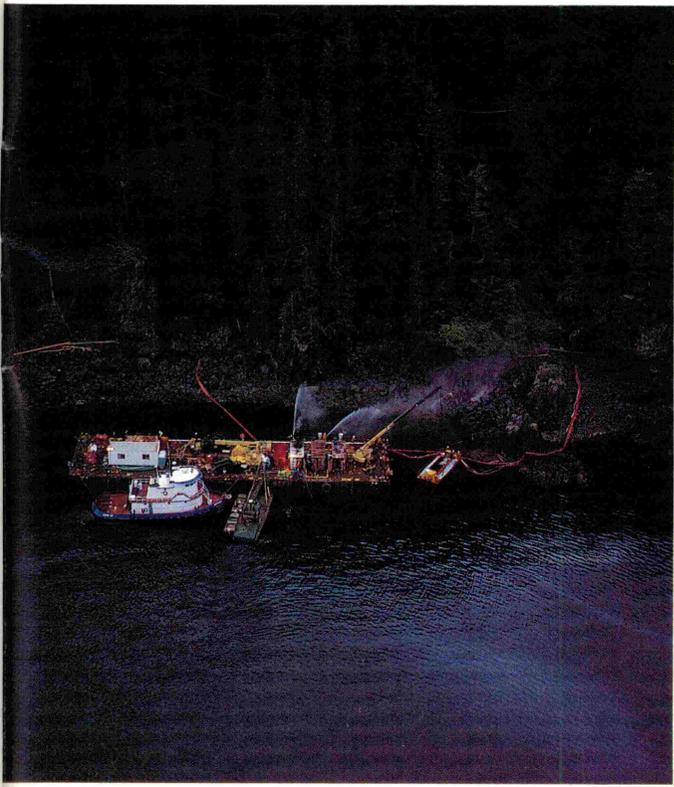
will be fostered by AFA members in Alaska and will either be held in incubators or hatched as the need arises. Once these birds are able to return to the wild and when there is a place for them to return, they will be released.

At the time of this writing the slick covers 3,000 square miles. Most of the toxic gases have evaporated. It is as much as 90 feet thick and is covered by a tarry goo which breaks off as it hardens and either floats to shore or drops in nodules to the ocean floor. These nodules may remain for decades. Some plankton readily consume crude oil and either change their morphology, die from the toxins, or carry them around until they are eaten by something larger, so even when the oil is no longer visible it will continue destroying the ecology of the area.

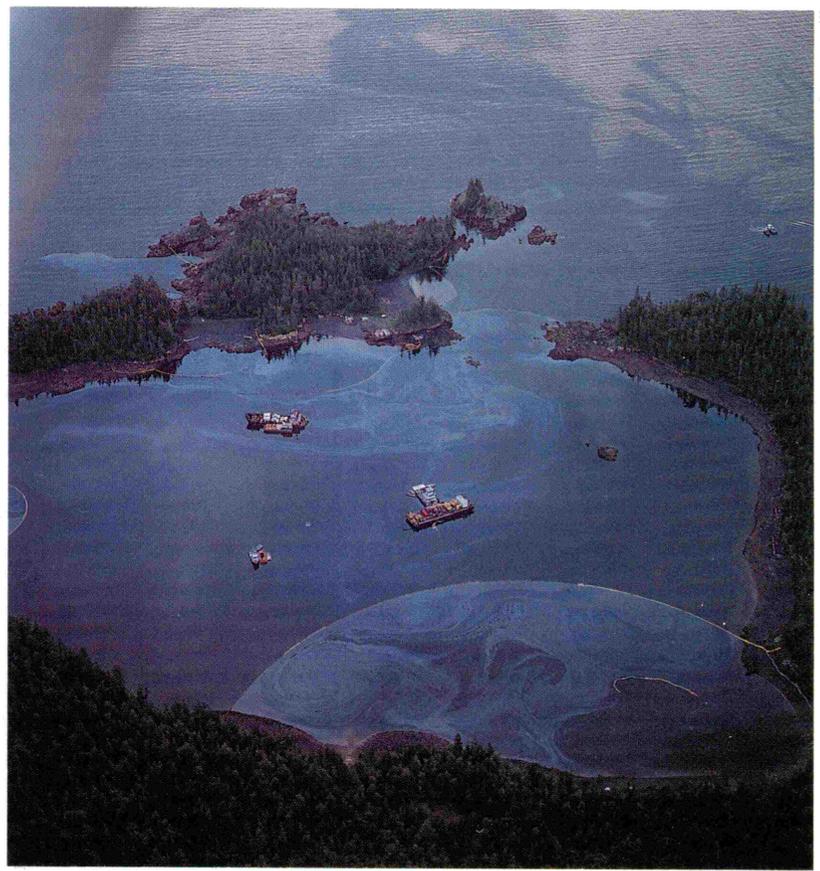
The devastation of Prince William Sound is on a scale heretofore unheard of. 150,000 birds lost. Half a billion hatchery-bred salmon fry effected and, in the long run, maybe as much as a trillion dollars in damages. Who is at fault? Who is to blame? To not punish someone would be to harden our sensibilities and to deny our soul. Do we go after the skipper of the *Exxon Valdez* who, except for this one tragic lapse of judgement, would have been considered a champion of the environment? If you ask an Alaskan, most would say the culprit is Exxon and they would be right. But who is Exxon? Exxon is us. All of us. We are the ones who allow the oil companies to regulate themselves. We are the ones who allowed them to bring single hulled tankers into fragile estuaries when we knew they should have double separated hulls. It is us who accept plastic bags at the grocery store, and styrofoam containers at fast food places. We drive gas guzzling monsters around with but one person in them. It is we who create the insatiable need for crude.

Prince William Sound does not belong to Alaska. It belongs to the whole world. We should all be thankful that only 10 million gallons were spilled for it would only take the contents of four supertankers to totally cover every ocean in the world, and the way things are now it's just a matter of time.

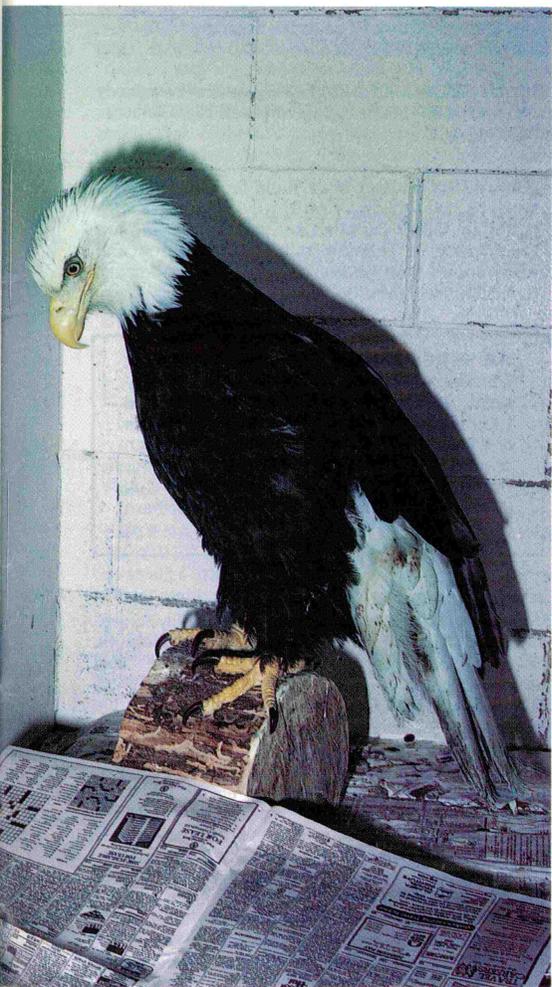
Author's note: Dr. Jim Scott accepts donations for eagle rehabilitation. Send checks to: Bird Treatment and Learning Center, 1600 E. Tudor Rd., Anchorage, AK 99507. ●



Huge steamcleaners attempting to clean the beaches.



Boats attempting to corral the sheen at Knight Island.



Eagle #1 recuperating after surgery.

AFA is Conservation too!

Name: Mariana (Guam) Crow, *Corvus kubaryi*
Range: Western Pacific islands of Guam and nearby Rota
Status: Endangered on Guam, status unknown on Rota

Conservation Action: During April of 1989, Guam birds subcommittee chair Gary Michael will return to Guam to continue his field observations on this species and to investigate the feasibility of developing a captive propagation program for it.

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BOOKS • BOOKS • BOOKS — Pampered Parrot Haven Inc. opens "The Discount Pet Book Store." Grand opening discounts! The Grey Parrot, de Grahl, \$15.75; Australian Parrots, Forshaw, \$68; Bird Owner's Home Health & Care Handbook, Gallerstein, \$15.50; The Complete Budgerigar, Vriends, \$15.25; The Complete Book of Parrots, Low, \$12.75; Parrots of the World, Forshaw, \$29.75; The New Finch Handbook, \$5.25; Encyclopedia of Cockatiels, Smith, \$14.75. Plus shipping. Prices good thru June '89. M/C, Visa, Amx for orders over \$50. Phone (516) 922-1169. Oyster Bay, New York. 2(X3)

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SCENIC BIRD FOOD — Birds love it! Light and crunchy, complete nutrition in every bite. Give your bird variety with corn, cheese, and red apple flavors. Used by major zoos and breeders. Send \$5 for generous samples or call to place your order. Greeson's Baby Parrots, 4201 SW 25th Ave., Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33312. Phone (305) 792-5657. 2(X3)

FEATHER FARM offers eucalyptus chips (premium nesting material for parrots!), 25 lb. boxes, \$25 plus shipping. Humidaira incubator, like new, model no. 21, \$550. Will ship. Visa or MasterCard accepted. Phone (707) 255-8833. Napa, California. 3(X6)

TEST KITS. Test your birds at home for bacteria and yeast infections. Determine for yourself the best choice of antibiotics for treatment. Concerned about your lack of knowledge or experience? Don't be! "NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY" Call 1 (602) 820-9194 or write MicroBio Products, Inc., P.O. Box 24778, Tempe, AZ 85282. 1(X1)

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MISCELLANEOUS

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BIRD LAW — legal problems with your birds? Neighbor complaints, breeding loans gone sour, been cheated, zoning problems, importations, contracts? We address all legal problems regarding birds. LAW OFFICES: P.O. Box 6393, Woodland Hills CA 91365, Gerald M. (Jerry) Jennings, phone (818) 884-5476. (cont.) 5(X6)

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Deadline Schedule

Oct / Nov '89
Aug. 15 — editorial copy
Aug. 15 — ADS, classified & display

Dec / Jan '90
Oct. 1 — editorial copy
Oct. 15 — ADS, classified & display

Feb / Mar '90
Dec. 1 — editorial copy
Dec. 15 — ADS, classified & display

Apr / May '90
Feb. 1 — editorial copy
Feb. 15 — ADS, classified & display

June / July '90
April 1 — editorial copy
April 15 — ADS, classified & display

Aug / Sept '89
June 1 — editorial copy
June 15 — ADS, classified & display

