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UCD experts are looking for killer of Puget Sound birds



Joe Gaydos, Pacific Northwest regional director and chief scientist of the SeaDoc Society, with an ill sea duck. (courtesy UC Davis)

Something is killing the seabirds and sea ducks of Puget Sound, and UC Davis experts are working to uncover the causes of the problem.

They estimate that today's population of birds in 30 species is only about half what it was in the 1970s.

"Thirty percent - nearly one-third - of these bird species are already listed as threatened or endangered in our region, or are candidates for listing," said UC Davis wildlife veterinarian Joe Gaydos, who works on Puget Sound ecosystem issues at his office on Orcas Island, north of Seattle.

"The birds are sentinels for the health of our regional ecosystem and they are telling us that something is seriously wrong."

Gaydos is Pacific Northwest regional director and chief scientist of the SeaDoc Society, a marine ecosystem health program of the UC Wildlife Health Center, at the School of Veterinary

Medicine.

Last fall, the SeaDoc Society convened the region's top marine scientists and resource managers to assess the seabird and sea duck situation and recommend a course of action for researchers and public agencies.

One outcome of that meeting was that new studies are being designed to focus on bird declines as they relate to bait fish declines. Also, the SeaDoc Society funded new studies of specific species, such as Western grebes and surf scoters, with support from UCD grants and private donations.

One study is being led by University of Washington researcher Julia Parrish, who last summer saw thousands of baby murrets (pronounced "murs") starve on Tatoosh Island. Murre chick survival depends on an abundance of bait fish, but Parrish found that the parent birds caught no sand lance, few herring, and fewer surf smelt and eulachon than usual.

Another study, this one by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, will use SeaDoc funds and radio transmitters to follow sea ducks called surf scoters as they migrate between California, Washington and the Canadian Arctic. Gaydos will surgically implant the transmitters this spring.

The SeaDoc Society also is working with the Washington state agency to conduct a complete review of the status of Western grebes this year. More than 25 percent of the world's Western grebe population winters in Puget Sound, where numbers are down 90 percent in the past decade.

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