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2019 Alaska Seabird Die-off Update

Health & Well-being Collaboration Team Meeting

10 September 2019

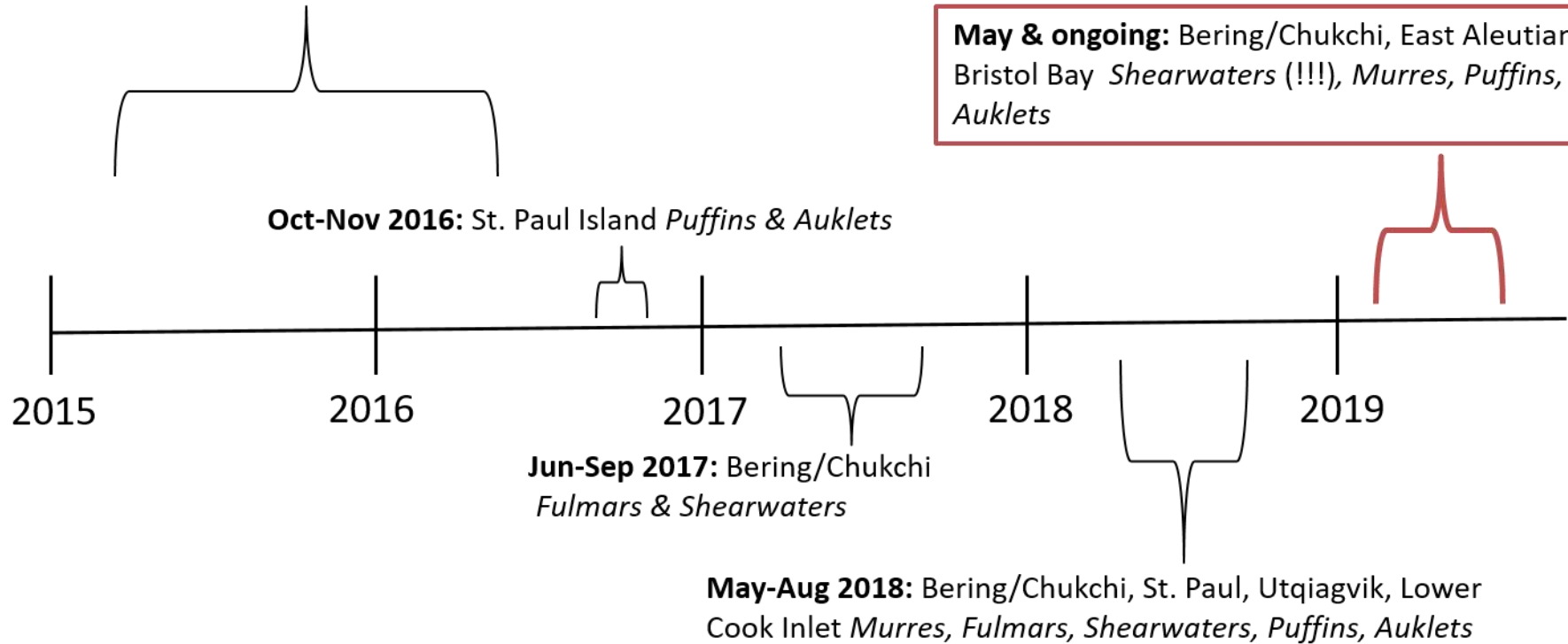
Robb Kaler and Kathy Kuletz

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Management



Alaska Seabird Die-offs: 2015 to Present

May 2015-June 2016: Gulf of Alaska *Common Murres* (!!!)



Historically, seabird die-off events have occurred occasionally in Alaska; however, large events have occurred annually since 2015.



What is Happening?



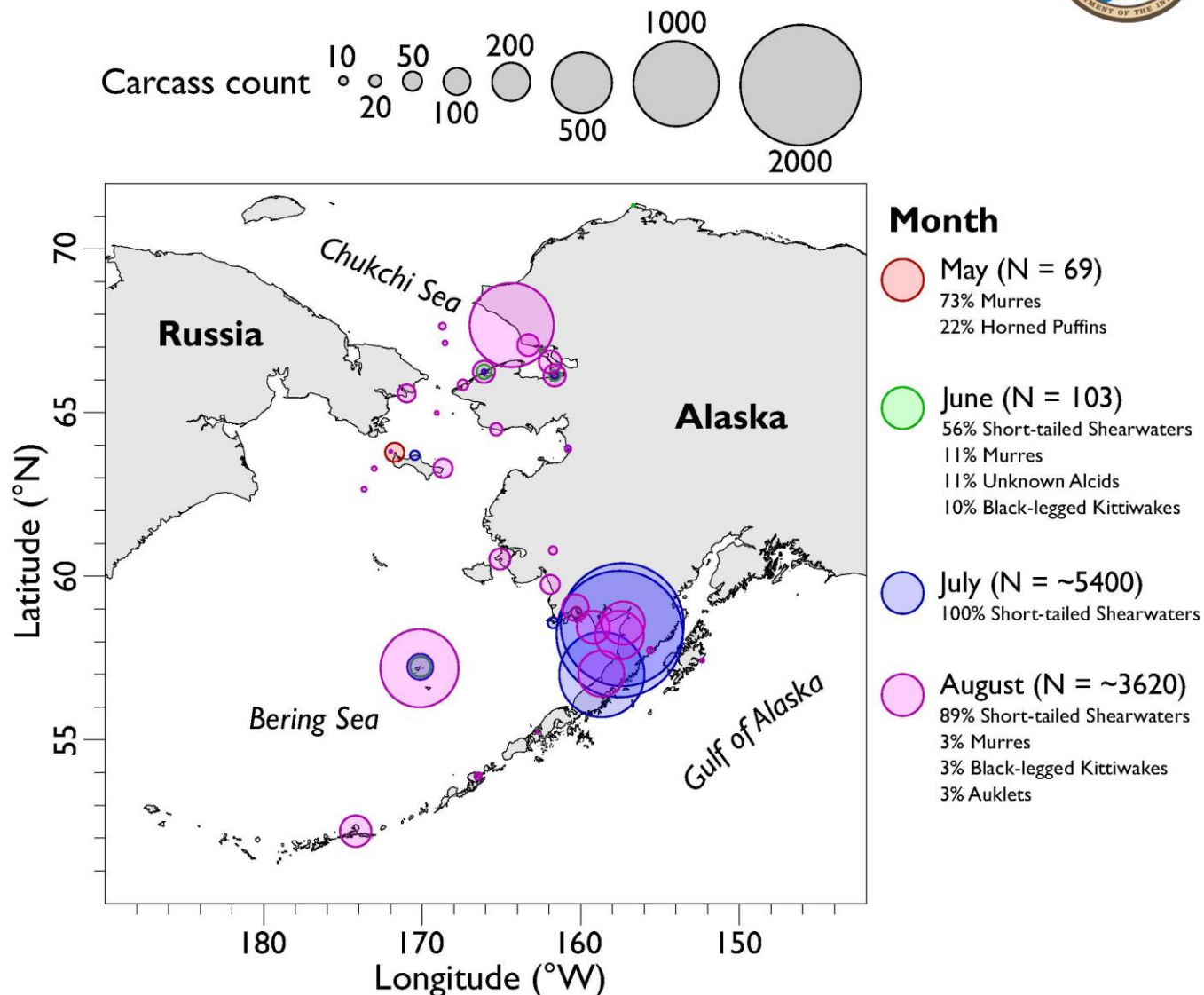
May 2019, the FWS received reports of dead and dying murres and puffins in the northern Bering and Chukchi seas.

Late July - early August, thousands of short-tailed shearwaters washed up on Bristol Bay region beaches.

By mid-August, the shearwater die-off extended along coastal Alaska north to Chukotka Peninsula of Russia.

Late August, die off is widespread (including Russia coasts), primarily shearwaters, but also puffins, murres, auklets

More than 9000 carcasses have been counted





What Is Being Done?

- Seabird carcasses from multiple locations have been sent to **USGS National Wildlife Health Center** for examination and testing.
- Initial results of 20 carcasses examined indicate **starvation as the cause of death; however, in SE Alaska** exposure to saxitoxin (biotoxin associated with Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning, PSP) was linked to a localized die-off of breeding tern in June.
- Analyses of tissues by **USGS Alaska Science Center** for the presence of harmful algal bloom toxins (saxitoxin, domoic acid) is ongoing and **has not been detected in samples analyzed from the Bristol Bay north to the Bering Strait region.**
- For birds examined and tested during **previous seabird die-off (2015-2018) cause of death has consistently been starvation**; however birds had trace levels of saxitoxin in their digestive tracts and while there is no evidence of acute toxicity as a cause of seabird deaths, it is possible that **exposure to saxitoxin may have been a contributing factor.**
- No avian diseases have been detected to date.
- **Harmful Algal Blooms and Food Safety & Human Consumption:** FWS cannot advise on this subject but emphasizes **best practices when handling harvested seabirds or waterfowl.** Do not consume sick or dying seabirds.

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What's Happening?

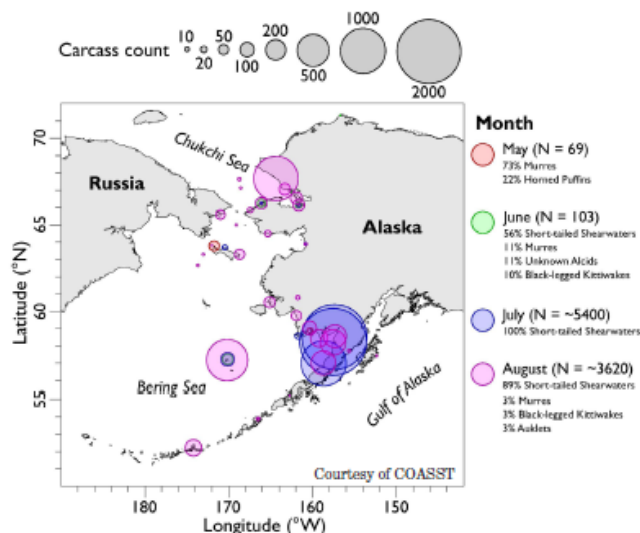
Beginning in May 2019, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began receiving reports of dead and dying seabirds from the northern Bering and Chukchi seas, followed by reports in late June to early August of thousands of short-tailed shearwaters washed up on beaches in the Bristol Bay region. By mid-August, the shearwater die-off had extended along coastal Alaska north to the Chukotka Peninsula of Russia. Additional seabirds affected include puffins, murres, and auklets, but at much lower numbers than shearwaters.

What's Being Done?

The USFWS is coordinating with federal, state, tribal partners, and communities to collect reports and track the number of birds involved, geographic area affected, and duration of the die-off event. Seabird carcasses are being collected from multiple locations and sent to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center for examination and testing. Initial results indicate starvation as the cause of death in the Bering and Chukchi seas. However, in southeast Alaska exposure to saxitoxin (a biotoxin associated with Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning) was linked to a localized die-off of breeding terns in June. Saxitoxin has not been detected in samples analyzed from Bristol Bay north to the Bering Strait region. Tissues sampled during examination will be analyzed by the USGS Alaska Science Center for harmful algal

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

2019 Alaska Seabird Die-off



bloom toxins and those results will be shared as they become available.

What Can I Do?

Report observations of sick or dead birds to regional partners:

- **North Slope:** Taqulik Hepa (907) 852-0350
- **Northwest Arctic:** Cyrus Harris (907) 442-7914
- **Bering Strait Region:** Brandon Ahmasuk (907) 443-4265 or Gay Sheffield (907) 434-1149
- **Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta:** Jennifer Hooper (907) 543-7470
- **Bristol Bay:** Gayla Hoseth (907) 842-6252
- **Pribilof Islands:** Lauren Divine (907) 891-3031
- **Unalaska:** Melissa Good (907) 581-1876
- **Aleutians:** Karen Plotnikoff (907) 222-4286
- **Or report by phone or email to the USFWS:** 1-866-527-3358 or AK_MBM@FWS.GOV



Participate in monitoring efforts on your local beaches:
COASST provides training.
Visit www.coasst.org.

Information to report includes:

- Location, Time & Date observed
- Size of area observed (e.g. length of beach)
- Type & number of birds (count or estimate)
- Photos of sick/dead birds
- Video of unusual behavior (approachable, drooping wings)



Updated September 9, 2019