PRESS RELEASE

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Scientists Work to Protect Shorebirds from Gulf Coast Oil Spill

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Plymouth, MA (PRWeb) 25 May 2010 – Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences' Shorebird Recovery Project (SRP) team has been working with partners in the northern Gulf of Mexico for the past several weeks to protect important shorebird areas from the Deepwater Horizon off-shore oil spill. The oil, spewing for a month now, is a serious threat to high-priority migratory shorebird species currently nesting and raising chicks around the Gulf Coast. Of greatest conservation concern are the beach-nesting American Oystercatcher, Wilson's Plover, and Snowy Plover.

Above: A nesting Wilson's Plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*). Right: These days-old Wilson's Plover chicks are naturally well camouflaged. / Both © M. Zdravkovic/CBC

"These shorebird species's populations are already in decline from ongoing coastal habitat loss, disturbance from human activities, and climate-change effects," said Dr. Charles Duncan, Director of the SRP. "An oil spill of this magnitude in an area as important as the Gulf could have significant long-term impacts on these vulnerable species, which need coastal habitats to survive."

Dr. Duncan also directs Manomet's Executive Office of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN), a longstanding initiative within the SRP. Under this office's leadership, international shorebird experts have authored science-based Species Conservation Action Plans for the most at-risk species identified in the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan. Each action plan lists the most important known breeding, migration, and wintering sites for a species. Manomet's Meredith Gutowski, WHSRN Conservation Specialist, and Lisa Schibley, SRP Database Specialist, have mapped these sites using Google Earth, creating an interactive, multi-layer conservation tool. After the Deepwater Horizon disaster, they began overlaying this with oil-spill trajectory maps to quickly identify sites and species potentially in harm's way.

"We've been sharing our map and other technical resources with federal, state, and local partners in the Gulf region to help expedite the protection of high-priority shorebirds and habitats," said Gutowski. "It's a tragic and unexpected use of this tool, but a meaningful one." The map also is in Manomet's Newsroom.

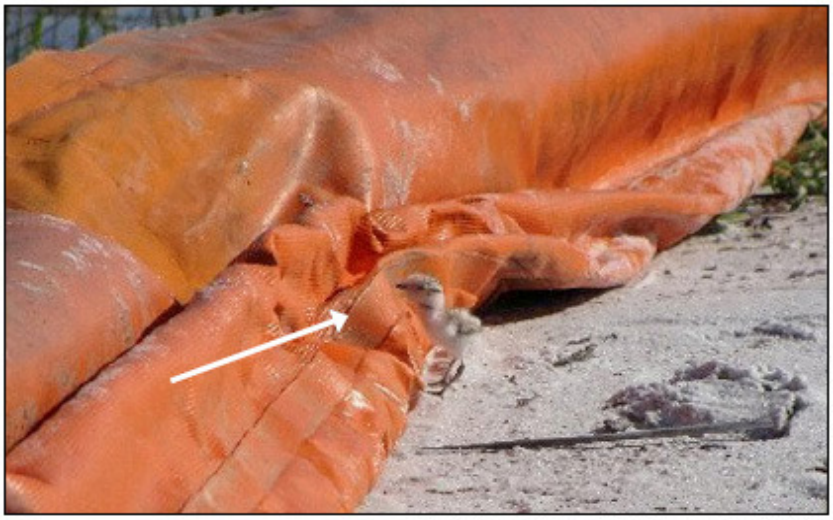
In a related effort, Manomet's Dr. Stephen Brown, Director of Shorebird Science, and Stephanie Schmidt, Data Coordinator, have been compiling and sharing International Shorebird Survey (ISS) data with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and other partners to determine the numbers of all shorebirds using Gulf Coast sites pre-spill. The ISS is a citizen-science monitoring program that Manomet began in 1972. "Understanding shorebirds' use prior to the impact enables wildlife management agencies to better gauge the potential scope of damage and prepare accordingly," explained Dr. Brown. "The ISS data may also support mitigation measures needed for spill-related wildlife loss."

The American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) spends its entire life along the coast. / Both © Shiloh Schulte

According to Manomet's Shiloh Schulte, American Oystercatcher Recovery Coordinator and coauthor of WHSRN's conservation action plan for this species, "Oystercatchers are particularly vulnerable to contamination from this spill because they live exclusively along shorelines, are short-distance migrants, and forage on oysters, clams, and other bivalves in the water." Oil has reached Louisiana's Chandeleur Islands, where American Oystercatchers are currently nesting and raising chicks. Other important oystercatcher nesting areas include Florida's Cedar Key region and the Texas Gulf coast, both still at risk. "Northwest Florida also supports more than 1,000 oystercatchers in the winter—that's up to 15% of the total U.S. population," noted Schulte.

In the early to mid 2000s, scientist Margo Zdravkovic led the first comprehensive surveys of beach-nesting birds along the Gulf Coast on behalf of the Coastal Bird Conservation program (CBC), then part of National Audubon Society. These surveys revealed that 70% of the total U.S. population of the Wilson's Plover, a high-priority migratory shorebird species, occurs in the Gulf region; more than 26% of the U.S. total occurs in coastal Louisiana.

Ms. Zdravkovic, Director of Conservian (the nonprofit organization now managing the CBC) and author of WHSRN's conservation action plan for the Wilson's Plover [in progress], was scheduled to begin the second round of surveys this May when the spill occurred. "The spill could not have happened at a worse time—the breeding season," said Zdravkovic. "These birds will be nesting and raising chicks along the Gulf Coast for the next 3 months."



On the Gulf Coast, an otherwise well-intentioned, on-shore boom has separated this flightless Snowy Plover chick (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) from its nest, now on the other side (follow arrow above). Shorebird scientists are working with oil response teams to help place booms around, and not through, these sensitive areas./ © M. Zdravkovic/CBC

The CBC crew has been tirelessly collecting current beach-nesting data from Florida to Louisiana to aid pre- and post-impact assessments. These targeted data complement those from Manomet's broad, multi-year ISS dataset. The CBC is also monitoring, and helping to prevent or minimize, damage to nests and chicks from on-shore boom placement, beach clean ups, and other well-intentioned efforts. July 2010 through February 2011, CBC will also be surveying and monitoring post-breeding shorebirds in south coastal Texas.

The Snowy Plover is a high-priority migratory shorebird species whose Pacific Coast subspecies, the Western Snowy Plover, is already federally listed as Endangered. Approximately 63% of the plover pairs currently nesting on Gulf Coast beaches are along a 60-mile stretch of southernmost Texas. "Our surveys indicate that some Snowy Plovers remain in the Gulf region year-round," noted Bill Howe, Nongame Coordinator for the USFWS Southwest Region's Migratory Bird Office and coauthor of WHSRN's conservation action plan for the Snowy Plover [in progress].

The Gulf Coast oil spill will be a conservation concern throughout the summer and fall. At that time, many shorebird species will be either returning to the Gulf region for the winter or stopping there to rest and refuel before migrating hundreds or thousands of miles more to wintering sites further south. Dr. Duncan affirmed that Manomet's SRP team will continue sharing its technical resources and expertise with partners to help protect or recover migratory shorebirds hemisphere-wide from the impacts of this spill.

About Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences: One of the nation's oldest nonprofit environmental research organizations, Manomet is dedicated to conserving natural resources for humans and wildlife. Through science and public engagement, Manomet works to integrate social, economic, and environmental values into enduring, sustainable systems that will support the needs of present and future generations. Manomet's headquarters are in Plymouth, Massachusetts (USA), with offices in Maine, Vermont, Mexico, and Chile.