

June 2010 Issue 41

LightHawk's monthly update, WayPoint, was created to highlight the impact of our work. Each edition covers one specific flight, or series of flights, and illustrates how LightHawk advances conservation efforts throughout North and Central America through the unique perspective of flight. We hope you enjoy WayPoint and will share with others our success stories from above.

Oil, Gas, and Water Don't Mix



A boat attempts to collect oil from the spill by skimming it with booms near Breton Island, which has a nesting colony of Brown Pelicans. Photo: Daniel Beltra/Greenpeace/LightHawk



Aerial photos confirm that 20 days after the Deepwater Horizon oil platform exploded, oil reached the Chandeleur Islands. The explosion caused a wellhead to leak oil and has created the worst spill in U.S. history, Photo: Daniel Beltra/Greenpeace/LightHawk

At LightHawk, we always carefully weigh the conservation value of posting a mission against the resources used. In light of the recent horrendous events in the Gulf of Mexico, we have become even more conscious about our use of gas and oil.

On Tuesday April 20, the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oilrig exploded, killing 11 platform workers and injuring 17 others. It burned and sank, leaving a broken and twisted pipe gushing oil and gas from source to sea. The site is 41 miles offshore, and the wellhead is 5000 feet deep. Credible estimates place the release of oil at 1,500,000 to 4,000,000 gallons a day. Gas pours into the water column from the same well pipe at a rate rivaling that of the oil.

Days after the catastrophe, LightHawk and our sister organization SouthWings began receiving requests for aerial support to document the nature and breadth of the leak, and monitor the ecological impacts. Both organizations have worked tirelessly to support partners in the region. On May 7, volunteer pilot Andy Dunigan set the stage for LightHawk by providing a first look at the oil leak to scientists from the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL) and a University of New Orleans aquatic biology expert. Fresh from her flight, Coalition Science Director Natalie briefed NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco during a boat tour and was able to share the observations she gleaned during her flight. At that moment, the oil remained offshore, but not for long.

Volunteer pilot Brian Williams picked up where Dunigan left off. Williams, a sharp South African with a passion for conservation, helped LightHawk initiate new partnerships along the Texas and Louisiana coast in 2009. From the first flight, Williams was captivated by the region and the struggle underway to halt the continuing loss of wetlands and land. On June 12, he flew a Dutch government team which is assessing engineering options for restoring land and ecological function to the hurricane damaged region. After the mission, he said "As an engineer, I see their concern about subsidence, and how appalling the city's defenses are. Basically, New Orleans is rapidly becoming



Deteriorated marsh at the Mississippi River Bird foot delta is clearly apparent when seen from above. *Photo: Steven Peyronnin/Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana/LightHawk*



In this photo, a boat equipped with booms for skimming oil goes out into the Gulf of Mexico. *Photo: Daniel Beltra/Greenpeace/LightHawk*



The Chandeleur Islands, a chain of barrier islands 50 miles long, is part of the Breton National Wildlife Refuge due to its importance for migrating birds. LightHawk missions over the Chandeleurs confirm oil has reached its shores. *Photo: Daniel Beltra/Greenpeace/LightHawk*

an island. The rate of loss in the Delta is very rapid. Perhaps the oil will help draw attention, and help CRCL to influence others to change policies.”

Drawing attention is precisely the mission of accomplished photographer Daniel Beltrá, who took to the skies on May 9 with Williams. On assignment for Greenpeace, Beltrá is also an International League of Conservation Photography Fellow. Instead of a sprawling Valdez-style pool of heavy crude, he and other observers witnessed moving rivers of rust colored light crude. The photographs he made showing the movement of oil toward the beleaguered Chandeleur Islands have helped inform Greenpeace and other groups.

After dropping Beltrá off, Williams brought Dr. Ed Overton of Louisiana State University and CRCL’s president aloft to confirm oil locations and identify specific areas for site sampling post-flight. The flight uncovered numerous unusual phenomena in the water beyond the rust rivers of oil – symptoms of effects that Overton continues to investigate.

As of this writing, oil is saturating coastlines and wetlands, tar balls are washing ashore as far away as Cuba, birds are coated in oil and sea turtles are ingesting oil as they forage and try to move onshore to nest. As of June 29th, 2023 birds have been collected, 60 percent visibly oiled. Less than half the birds collected were alive and are being treated. Sea turtles are being hardest hit: 583 have been collected, the majority dead, and slightly less than half visibly oiled. Chemical dispersants, while effectively breaking up oil, have added a level of toxicity to the Gulf that we will only begin to comprehend by monitoring and studying changes to the waters and marine life over time. The large amount of gas being released triggers an underwater microbial response that leads to rapid declines in water-borne oxygen, essentially choking off the air supply of marine creatures.

The aerial perspective remains critical to an ongoing effort to understand the leak and make the Gulf coast whole again, but LightHawk’s involvement in the area doesn’t end with this tragedy. When the Deepwater Horizon sank, Louisiana and Texas coasts were already reeling from decades of poor wetlands, river, and coastline management and the effects of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. LightHawk donated missions will help document effects of the oil disaster and, in the years to come, will continue to provide an aerial perspective to support our partners’ long-term goals to encourage better management and stewardship of the area’s coastlines.

We are actively seeking experienced volunteer pilots based in Texas or Louisiana willing and able to donate extensive flying and multi-day missions over the Gulf coast. If you know a potential pilot, please contact LightHawk’s Pilot Outreach Manager Greg Bedinger at 206-842-5034 or gbedinger@lighthawk.org.

Did you know...?

The Gulf of Mexico region has 4500 oil and gas platforms; houses 50% of the nation's oil and gas production; comprises 50% of the nation's wetlands; supplies 85% of the shrimp harvest and 60% of the oyster harvest; is critical habitat to many of the nation's wading and wetland birds, marine mammals, fish and shellfish; and provides nesting grounds for five of the world's seven species of sea turtles.



LightHawk Fly-in ~ October 1-4, 2010 ~ San Diego, California

- Noted underwater photographer and International League of Conservation Photographers member Brian Skerry will be our keynote speaker. Check out some of the images gained from 10,000 hours underwater: www.brianskerry.com
- First 30 reservations are guaranteed a water view at our host hotel the [Island Palms Hotel and Marina](#) located on Shelter Island. Call 619-222-0561 and mention you qualify for the LightHawk reduced rate of \$110/night .

About LightHawk

What started in 1979 with one man and a vision has grown to over 185 volunteer pilots flying missions across the U.S., into Canada, through Mexico and down to Panama. Today, LightHawk is the oldest and largest nonprofit, volunteer pilot-based organization flying environmental missions in collaboration with hundreds of partner organizations.

At LightHawk we believe the view from the window of a small airplane provides a powerful and effective platform for research, ground-truthing, environmental awareness, and education.

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