

Recollection Of an Old Oil Spill

A San Francisco scientist warned yesterday that the worst wildlife damage from the spreading oil slick may be still to come.

Robert T. Orr, associate director of the California Academy of Sciences, recalled how he and a colleague spent weeks conducting an ecological investigation of a similar ship collision and spill that happened 34 years ago.

In that accident — only one mile from the site of last week's tanker crash — the worst waterfowl deaths hit the California murrelets, well after the collision, he added.

And the current spill is following "the same pattern" as the 1937 disaster, Orr declared.

That crash, also in a dense fog, saw some 2.7 million gallons of oil dumped into the bay and later spread to sea after the liner *President Coolidge* collided with the tanker *Frank H. Buck* one-quarter mile west of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The *Coolidge*, with 678 passengers and a crew of 350, was heading out of the harbor and the tanker, carrying a crew of 28, was heading toward Martinez, out of Ventura, when they hit on March 6.

As in the recent incident, there were no injuries.

The *Frank H. Buck* eventually drifted onto rocks at Land's End, and a long struggle began to lighten her load of oil and pull her free.

But two weeks later, on March 21, a bad storm and high seas caused the real damage.

Although a few thousand gallons of oil had been pumped out of the tanker, almost the entire cargo still was aboard when the storm hit.

The winds and waves broke up the *Buck*, and all the oil flowed into the water. It immediately began spreading, doing extensive damage to birds and marine life in its path.

The slick spread "over the greater part of the upper bay, from Sausalito almost to Hunters Point, according to newspaper accounts at the time—as well as flowing into the Pacific.

Methods to clean and save birds were unknown, and so the SPCA sent a man to patrol the beaches with orders to destroy all disabled birds.

Fishermen—of crabs, abalone and mussels — complained the slick interfered with their catch, and seals moved a hundred miles south to avoid it.

It was then that Orr and his colleague, the late James Moffitt, curator of birds and mammals at the Academy of Sciences at the time, went to work.

"There was a very high mortality rate to bird life," Orr recalled yesterday. "The early rate followed the same pattern we have been following now. The first birds to die were along the shore — grebes, loons and scooters.

"But the biggest death rate came among the murrelets. This is a bird that nests farther out.

"As the slick drifted out — as it is doing now — it began to play havoc with the murrelets," he continued.

"When I checked today (yesterday) I saw where more murrelets are starting to come in now, — either dead or covered in oil.

"So far the damage to the other birds has been far less this time than in 1937. This time you have people — particularly young people — who

are interested. And they know how to clean the birds now. Back in 1937 nobody seemed to care very much."