

Wildlife Fallout After Extreme Winter Weather

by Sarah Belles

Among the negative impacts of the recent winter storm, Texas wildlife has definitely taken a hit. With power now returned and roads safe to drive on, it is possible to start monitoring how serious this fallout will prove to be. It will likely take weeks of food cycling through ecosystems to see what kind of impacts we may be dealing with and what species were most affected. Citizen science has been helping tremendously in the effort to gather numbers and locations of cold-related wildlife deaths across Texas, especially on the coast.

As icy roads begin to thaw, wildlife in search of water may begin to wander out onto them. You may have noticed birds especially doing this, sometimes in large flocks. The warmth of the pavement can also attract birds seeking heat. Many birds and other animals have been lost to collisions this way while just doing whatever they can to try to survive the harsh weather. In colder weather, wildlife can be much slower to move and may not be able to get out of the way quick enough to avoid being hit.

If you have been to the beach since the freezing weather, you may have noticed a large number of dead fish littering the shores. This phenomenon is referred to as a “fish kill” and occurs during periods of extreme cold. It occurs mostly in shallow water where the temperature can change more easily than in deep water. If fish do not swim out to deeper water in time, they may end up as part of a fish kill. With this winter weather event being particularly severe, the resulting fish kill events may prove to be bigger than usual. This probably will not be known until more complete data is gathered to compare to fish kill events from previous years.

Another group of aquatic animals that struggles with cold water temperatures is sea turtles. Since sea turtles are cold blooded, they are not able to regulate their body temperatures. Like fish, if sea turtles are not able to reach deeper water before a cold spell, they can become “cold stunned.” A cold stunned sea turtle is alive, but is unable to move and is prone to death by other causes such as predation, collision, stranding, or drowning.

Rescue groups are trained to handle cold stunned turtles and expect these events when temperatures get low. This cold stun event proved to be much more serious than the ones that are usually anticipated. In the case of this winter storm, power outages made it difficult to keep the rescued turtles warm. Despite the challenge, volunteers were able to rescue thousands of cold-stunned sea turtles on the Texas coast in the aftermath of the brutal winter weather.

With Texas’ often unpredictable weather, we could definitely see winter storms like this one in the future. You can do your part to help wildlife out by driving cautiously and putting out seeds and sugar water for the hummers and other birds. Another way to help out is by reporting things you see, such as animals that you suspect perished due to cold weather, cold-stunned turtles on the coast, and fish kills on beaches. You can report stranded or cold stunned sea turtles to 1-866-TURTLE5, even if the turtle is already dead. Cold related wildlife deaths can be reported to Texas Parks and Wildlife online through iNaturalist.org by searching “Winter Storm Uri Wildlife Deaths” and adding your observations.