Labor Day Litter

By Celeste Silling

Labor Day is coming up this Monday and many of us are planning to celebrate by going to the beach! Texas beaches are beautiful, but as we all know, they are also magnets for trash and debris. Garbage of every size, shape, and material can be found on the beach, from tires in the dunes to plastic shards in the wrack line. Each year, approximately 17.6 billion pounds of plastic enter the ocean and it can sometimes feel like all of it floats directly to Texas!

In reality, while currents do bring in trash from the Gulf, our beach debris is mainly coming from within Texas itself. In fact, data collected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Ocean Conservancy has shown that Texas has the *highest* average weight of litter per mile surveyed of any state in the nation.

All this marine debris isn’t just an eyesore, it’s also a serious threat to Texas wildlife. Trash, especially plastic, can harm wildlife in two main ways: entanglement and ingestion. Entanglement occurs when an animal is trapped or tangled up in debris. Animals both in the water and on the beach get tangled up in fishing line, nets, and other plastic items and can’t escape. This can prevent them from hunting or foraging

Ingestion occurs when animals mistake trash for food or consume it by accident. When animals consume plastic, it can do damage to their digestive tract. Sharp edges can cut soft tissues, injuring the creature from inside. Often, the plastics are too big or plentiful to pass through their digestive systems and cannot be broken down by stomach acid. As a result, plastics can accumulate in the stomachs of wildlife, and, if enough plastics accumulate, the animal won’t be able to eat or properly digest food, and will starve.

Trash is a huge threat to animals and a blemish on our beaches, so let’s try to reduce our litter this Labor Day! Holidays always bring an influx of garbage to the beaches, but there are certain items that we always find after Labor Day in particular.

Oddly enough, we tend to find a large amount of discarded tents, chairs, BBQs, and other big items. Cutting down on this litter is simple enough- if one of your beach chairs breaks, don’t leave it on the beach. If one of your tents blows away, go get it! Basically, if one of belongings breaks, just bring it home and throw it away there.

Along with the big items, we always find plenty of food and beverage containers. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying a beer on the beach, just make sure you’re throwing away all of your cans and bottles. As for Styrofoam food containers, these break into smaller pieces in the ocean and so can easily be swallowed by turtles and other animals. Solving this problem is simple enough- bring a trash bag with you, put your garbage in as you finish with it, then take the bag home and throw it away.

Finally, another common post-Labor Day item is fishing line. As mentioned above, fishing line can easily tangle up birds and other animals, injuring or killing them. To cut down on this problem, you can bring a trash bag with you fishing, or wad up your excess line and put it in a beach trash can.

We hope that this article has inspired you to clean up our beaches this Labor Day! These solutions are simple, but effective and can make a big difference for wildlife. SPLASh (Stopping Plastics and Litter Along Shorelines) is a new program from American Bird Conservancy, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and Black Cat GIS focused on creating a cleaner environment for people, birds and other wildlife. If you want to learn more about marine debris or beach cleanups, visit us at splashtx.org or follow @SPLAShTrashTX on social media!