



May 14, 2008

Storm takes toll on beaches; wildlife hit hard

Few houses suffer major damage

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The News Journal

Early Tuesday morning, you could find almost any debris imaginable on the beach in Lewes -- nearly new life jackets, boats, driftwood, the base of a picnic table, a bright yellow minnow pot, enough sand toys to open a variety store -- even a dead shark.

But one thing was missing: sand.

That was in the parking lot and scattered along Savannah Road.

It was that way up and down Delaware's ocean and bay coasts. Once-wide beaches were reduced to slivers of dry sand, the entire coastal landscape reconfigured in a single 24-hour blow.

One cottage, along Delaware Bay, in Kent County, was believed to be lost and there was some flood damage to other homes.

But the biggest concern Tuesday as the sun came out was the habitat loss at a critically important time for migratory and nesting shorebirds, and the significant level of beach erosion.

"Of all times," said Rehoboth Beach City Manager Gregory J. Ferrese.

With just 10 days until the start of Memorial Day weekend, Ferrese worried whether there would be room on the beach for thousands of people who visit during the official start of the summer season.

"Our industry's tourism," he said. "We've lost a lot of sand."

Along the ocean coast, much of the sand was carried just off the beach to a protective sand bar. It will eventually make its way back to the shore, said state environmental Secretary John Hughes.

His advice to coastal officials: "Have a little patience."

Hughes said state beach crews first plan to remove damaged and destroyed sand fencing. Then, over the next several days, they'll let nature work to begin moving sand back in. As sand begins to move back, crews will use heavy equipment to repair any dune damage.

"Nature will normally rebuild," he said. "But the process can take two to four weeks."

Along the Delaware Bay shore, state crews found some dune damage. In communities like Kitts Hummock, much of the water that caused flooding came from the marsh and not from waves from the Delaware Bay, Hughes said.

On Tuesday, Al Metheny, Kent County's emergency management chief, came away heartened after heading an excursion into coastal areas for a preliminary damage assessment. Only a few homes

sustained significant damage, he said.

"We'll probably have one house that was a total loss. It was a very, very old place that pretty much sat right on the beach."

Metheny and his team visited Big Stone Beach, South Bowers, Bowers Beach, Pickering Beach and Kitts Hummock. Despite conditions that prompted a mandatory evacuation order Monday for the latter two communities, Metheny said only a handful of homes actually were invaded by flood waters.

Metheny said that, as of mid-afternoon Tuesday, most families chased away by Monday's rising water had returned to their homes.

Most roads along Kent County's Delaware Bay were closed Monday because of high water. Many longtime Kent County residents said the flooding was among the worst they'd ever seen, but Metheny said things could have been much worse.

"Considering the intensity of the water and the speed with which it came in, especially at Kitts Hummock," he said, "we were really, really lucky."

The late season storm was especially hard on wildlife.

"It was an environmental disaster," Hughes said.

Horseshoe crab eggs that were already deposited on bay beaches were washed away leaving little for shorebirds that are just beginning to arrive.

Before the storm, Delaware had seven Piping Plover nests at Cape Henlopen State Park from the Point at Cape Henlopen to Gordons Pond. All but two of those nests were destroyed by waves and high water, said Holly Niederriter, the state's nongame and endangered species coordinator.

The nesting pairs will likely try to establish new nests, she said.

"There's like a 99 percent chance they'll give it another shot," she said.
