

The Birds of DSDP Leg 96

BY WILLIAM R. NORMARK (WITH APOLOGIES TO ALFRED HITCHCOCK)

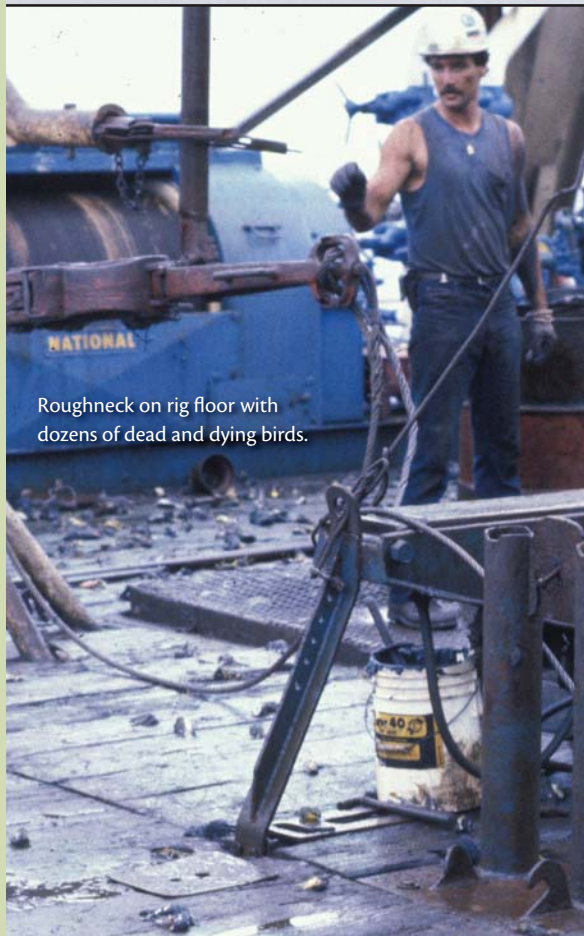
Leg 96 of the Deep Sea Drilling Project (DSDP) was the final leg of the very successful first scientific drilling program. It was also the only leg devoted to understanding the deposits of turbidity currents, so it was the first leg of great relevance to my primary research interests.

During one night in mid-October 1983, we were drilling on the middle Mississippi submarine fan about 300 km south of the mouth of the Mississippi River. I was up before first light that morning and proceeded to the mess hall for a cup of coffee before breakfast. To my surprise, there were a number of songbirds not only in the mess hall overhead but also along the external passageways. Birds were resting on instrument racks and other equipment in the lab areas. I proceeded onto the deck overlooking the drilling derrick, which was still illuminated with lights used during night operations. The derrick appeared out of focus, and only after my eyes adjusted to the dim light did the reason become clear—the derrick, the drilling platform, in fact much of the *Glomar Challenger*, were covered with birds, thousands of birds of all sizes and species. That morning, the roughnecks were tripping pipe; as each stand was being raised, a few roughnecks

would pick up shovels and scoop up dead birds and toss them overboard. This was done for safety reasons. By early morning, most of the smaller birds were dead, but larger species, including herons, ducks, and geese were surviving better; some had been herded into a makeshift cardboard enclosure erected in the forward part of the vessel.

The birds had been blown from the coastal areas of Texas and Louisiana by a major low-pressure system. Most were exhausted, wet, and obviously frightened once landing on the *Challenger* as the only port in a storm. It was tempting to think of this episode as an omen, related to the end of DSDP and (at that point) the unknown fate of the ship itself. Preliminary sketches for the cruise T-shirt included a number of macabre themes involving dead birds and the termination of DSDP, but by the end of the leg, a fairly understated (bland?) T-shirt design prevailed—as if DSDP ended with a whimper, not a bang.

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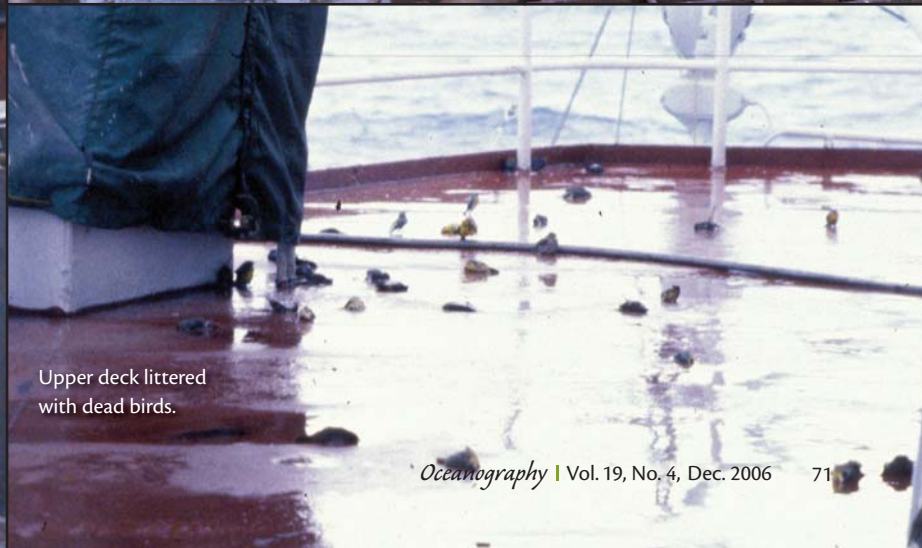
Roughneck on rig floor with dozens of dead and dying birds.



Larger birds, such as the Great Blue Heron and Green-backed Heron, and those species used to long migrations each year, fared better when blown out to sea.



Exhausted songbirds.



Upper deck littered with dead birds.