

# Volunteers headed for Alaska

## 5 leaving from Orlando to help animal victims of oil spill

By Lisanne Renner

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

With crates full of medical supplies, dishwashing detergent and towels, five wildlife rescue volunteers plan to leave Orlando this morning to help clean the thousands of oil-soaked birds and otters dying in Alaska.

"This is more monumental than two whales trapped in the ice. This is a vast wilderness," said Cindy Westra, co-founder of Back to Nature, a wildlife rehabilitation and education center near Chuluota, a Seminole County community.

Grocery stores have donated cases of Dawn dishwashing detergent, which is "best for cutting the oil," said Westra. Walt Disney World has donated towels and sheets for wrapping animals to keep them from cleaning themselves and to keep them warm. A rubber company gave waterproof gear.

The Orlando Humane Society and several businesses have paid the plane fare — \$590 a person. Veterinarians have contributed an antidote to the toxic oil.

The oil poisons birds when they preen themselves and otters when they lick their fur. Hawks, owls, eagles and other predators feed on the flesh of the oil-coated dead, likely causing their own death. And as eagles enter their nesting season, parents are feeding toxic food to their young.

Westra will be working in Alaska with Carmen Shaw, her partner in Back to Nature; Doris Mager of Apopka, founder of Save Our American Raptors; Mary Ann Clark, a wildlife rehabilitation worker in Osteen; and Jeff Wind, a postal service worker in Orlando. They plan to stay for one to three weeks and the Florida Audubon Society's Birds of Prey Center is forming a second rescue team to take over.

The 240,000 barrels of oil that spilled from the tanker Exxon Valdez on March 24 has turned Alaska's pristine Prince William Sound into a death trap for wildlife. The disaster also has galvanized volunteers, and the port city of Valdez is being deluged with more volunteers than it can handle,

many of them unqualified for the life-and-death work.

Though Central Florida's volunteers have guaranteed accommodations, motels are overrun and some volunteers are sleeping in the back of trucks and urinating in buckets.

"Right now we can't keep up with the calls coming from all across the planet," said Anne Wieland in a phone interview as she worked the hot line for the Oil Spill Volunteer Response Center, a clearinghouse in Anchorage.

For volunteers, the task is grim. Central Florida's team will be joining others who are using sponges to scrub birds that are recovering from shock and soaked to their skin with oil.

"You wash, dry, wait. Wash, dry, wait. It never ends," Westra said. She has done this before for Central Florida birds who have fallen into an open barrel of oil or have swum in an oil-slicked pond. In Alaska, thousands of birds — ducks, grebes, cormorants and loons — are feeble survivors or fatalities.

In Valdez a gym has been converted into an otter rescue center, but even the captured otters have only a 60 percent chance of surviving. "You spend two to three hours scrubbing them, they look fine and you think they're going to make it but then they die because they've ingested oil," said a volunteer.

If they don't die from ingesting oil, otters freeze to death in this land where five feet of snow sits on the ground. Oil on an otter ruins the insulation provided by its fur. Prince William Sound has about 15,000 sea otters, the biggest concentration in North America.

As volunteers tend to the spill's victims, townspeople are dealing with anger, grief and frustration. Organizers are planning a Prince William Sound Day on April 23 when, at 2 p.m. EDT, people around the world are being asked to observe five minutes of silence in honor of the animals that lost their lives and the people who lost their livelihoods.

Said Wieland, the hot line volunteer: "Share with us in our grief because it is profound."