

Exploring Gulf restoration issues with individuals working on the ground and in the water



## Dan Luke, SouthWings

Dan Luke is a volunteer pilot with [SouthWings](#), a non-profit organization that provides aviation resources in support of efforts to protect the environment in the Southeast. Dan joined the organization three years ago.



## Bonny Schumaker, On Wings of Care

Bonny Schumaker is the president and founder of [On Wings of Care](#), a registered non-profit organization that works to protect and preserve wildlife and wild habitat, and rescues domestic animals. On Wings of Care's work spans Central America through Canada and will soon include Africa. Bonny lives in both Southern California and the Gulf Coast and has been rescuing and rehabilitating domestic animals and wildlife for the past four decades.

### THE VIEW FROM THE AIR

#### **ELI: What work have you been doing in the Gulf since the BP spill?**

**Dan:** Last year, I did about a dozen or so flights with various organizations and various people over the spill, just to see what was going on. There were all sorts of organizations, nongovernmental organizations, scientists and various other people involved. I flew about 12 or 13 times last year and 2 or 3 times this year so far.

**Bonny:** I came to the Gulf in May 2010 thinking I could help with wildlife, but it quickly became apparent that there was a greater need for us to document the oil and its effects on the wildlife and the coastal areas from the air. Since then, On Wings of Care has flown over 400 hours in the Gulf and conducted well over 100 surveys. In addition to aerial surveys, we have also gone out in small boats and on foot

to collect over 300 samples of sand, sediment, surface water/oil, and dead wildlife.

This summer, the Coast Guard asked us to collaborate with them in finding, identifying and documenting hazardous materials in the Gulf. It was a surprise to me to find that, unlike in California, oil companies in the Gulf do not take responsibility for monitoring their own pipelines or facilities for leaks. So, we report most oil or gas sightings and, if needed, I talk with the companies responsible for them to give them more information. This has been a useful outcome I didn't expect to come out of our work.

#### **ELI: What did you see the first time you flew up over the Gulf after the spill?**

**Bonny:** When I first saw the spill, I was almost in disbelief at the expanse of it. I was prepared to see the colors of the rainbow, the metallic

sheen, the weathered crude, the thick red lace from the oil. I was not prepared to see how vast an area it covered. A photograph can't convey that: when you see a photograph and the oil covers the whole picture, you just assume they zoomed in. Video is a little better. But none of that gives you what you get from a small plane and you are looking as far as you can see to the horizon and everything is covered. That just gets you in the gut. And you realize how serious it is.

**Dan:** The first time I flew up, what struck me most was the vastness of the spill. The satellite images that were being shown really didn't give you a sense of how big it was. The first time we headed out that way and we got up to 3000 feet, there was all this oil in and under the water. It continued as far as the eye could see; and the horizon is a long way away at 3000 feet. Another thing that struck me was the smoke – at that time, they were burning the oil and you could see the big smoke pall coming off of it and stretching hundreds of miles inland.

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**ELI: Other than the oil and smoke, was there anything else you could see from the air?**

**Dan:** In later flights, you could see the oil coming ashore. You could also see the efforts to stop it: the booms that they were placing across passes and around islands. What struck me was the haphazard way it was proceeding and, in a lot of cases, how ineffective it was.

**Bonny:** Even when the boom stayed in place, you realized that all it was doing was trying to slow down the approach of some of the obviously visible surface oil onto the wetlands and beaches where people could see it. But, from the sky, you see it all. You don't get fooled like you would walking on the beach and not being able to see what's 20 yards offshore.

**ELI: From the time of the spill until now, what sorts of changes have you been seeing?**

**Bonny:** The obvious changes would be that the surface oil is not so evident: what we see now is surface sheen and not the numerous thick patches of weathered crude that we saw last year. But since the end of August, we've started to see what I called globules in a crescent located between 5 and 20 miles east of the Macondo well. Ed Overton at LSU has sampled these and said they were dead ringers for the Macondo well. It is unclear, however, whether the oil is from the original well, from fractures near that well, or from natural seeps. There have been a large number of NOAA and BP-contracted vessels in that area, but they aren't talking about what they're doing or what we've been seeing.

There is also a vast difference in the numbers of wildlife that we saw in the summer of 2010 and what we've seen in 2011. Let's start with whale sharks. In June 2010, there were hundreds of

them off of Ewing Bank. In May and June 2011, we found only four after extensive searching. By late August, much farther south, we found about 20 scattered among bait balls. We have still found some sperm whales, but far out into the blue water. We've spotted far fewer dolphins than last summer, though there have still been one or two large pods, some of them distressingly close to oil.

**Dan:** Early on, I saw a lot of oil in the Gulf, both right on the surface and just under the surface. Lately, in the recent flights, I have seen almost no oil in the Gulf. I think the last flight I had was over towards Cat Island, which is a barrier island right near the Mississippi-Louisiana coastline, and then out to the Chandeleur Islands. At that time, we didn't see much oil in the Gulf, but we did see oil coming ashore both at Cat Island and the Chandeleur Islands.

**ELI: Why is the view from the air an important perspective?**

**Dan:** The view from the air is important because it reveals things that you can't see any other way. You can't see the extent, the vastness of something like this oil spill from a boat. In other conservation flights, I have taken up river- and basin-keepers, who are used to the perspective from a road or from a boat. A lot of times I have taken those folks up for the first time to look at some particular issue they are interested in, and they will almost invariably see something they weren't even aware was going on. They had no idea.

**Bonny:** There is nothing like being over the spill and seeing it with your own eyes. Because you're not fooled any more. Booms don't fool you. The bags don't fool you. The neatly manicured sand doesn't fool you anymore – it's a joke because 10 yards away is the mess

they're hiding from you, only you can't see it from the ground.



Photo credit: Jerry Moran

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