Cat Island, where pelicans, spoonbills, and herons nested, was already eroding away when oil and dispersant chemicals from the spill hastened its demise.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL BELTRÁ

ANNIVERSARY

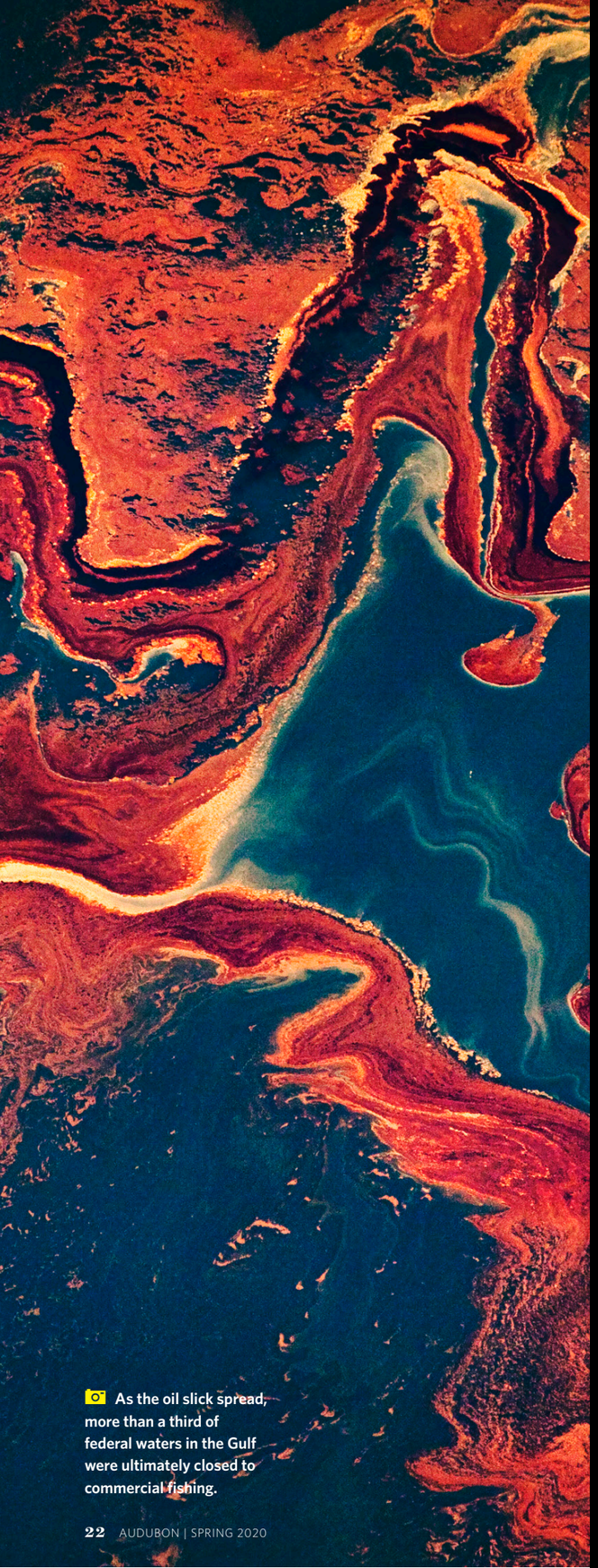
TEN YEARS LATER

BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster changed everything—and nothing at all.

THE WORST OIL SPILL IN U.S. HISTORY began with a deadly explosion on April 20, 2010. Many of us could remember the distress we felt as that day stretched into days, then months—a slow-building dread that no one could make a gaping hole drilled into the earth stop gushing. Capping the well took 87 days. The consequences kept unfurling.

Today, BP penalty funds flowing to the region provide an enormous opportunity to not only repair environmental damages from that spill, but also help restore a long-suffering Gulf Coast. In 2019 Audubon provided a roadmap for using $2 billion of this pot to shore up key habitats through 30 projects covering more than 136,000 acres. With partners, it's now ensuring many of those projects are advancing. For example, this winter the state of Louisiana rebuilt Queen Bess Island, an eroding pelican rookery—thereby helping it avoid the fate of nearby Cat Island, which has already sunk to the sea.

As the writers on the following pages can attest, the Gulf holds all of these possibilities—tragedy, resilience, and hope. They each watched the Deepwater Horizon disaster unfold, and witnessed the repercussions to people and birds, but took away different lessons. We asked them to reflect on the spill's political and personal legacy. What has transpired because of these horrific events? And what can we carry forward? —*The Editors*



As the oil slick spread, more than a third of federal waters in the Gulf were ultimately closed to commercial fishing.

TURNING POINT

BY JUSTIN NOBEL

America learned a lesson about the vast harms oil spills unleash when the Exxon Valdez tanker struck a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989, releasing an influx of crude into biologically rich waters. That spill prompted lasting reforms to prevent future disasters. But that was a different generation and time, and unfortunately, new lessons have to be learned. The BP spill again kicked people into action.

About a week after Deepwater Horizon exploded, Jonathan Henderson, then a coastal resiliency organizer with the Gulf Restoration Network whom I'd meet in the coming days, secured a spot in a small plane and flew over the disaster, shocked by what he saw. He began a relentless stint of 18-hour days, documenting the spill from land, sea, and air.

This fact is often forgotten, but just weeks before the spill President Obama announced a proposal to allow offshore drilling in sections of the Atlantic Seaboard, eastern Gulf and north Alaska's coast. The catastrophe stalled the controversial move. "There were past fights against the industry's expansion but there was nothing that got as much national attention as the BP spill," says Henderson, "and it happened to coincide with this time when U.S. policy was headed toward a plan to open up new areas."

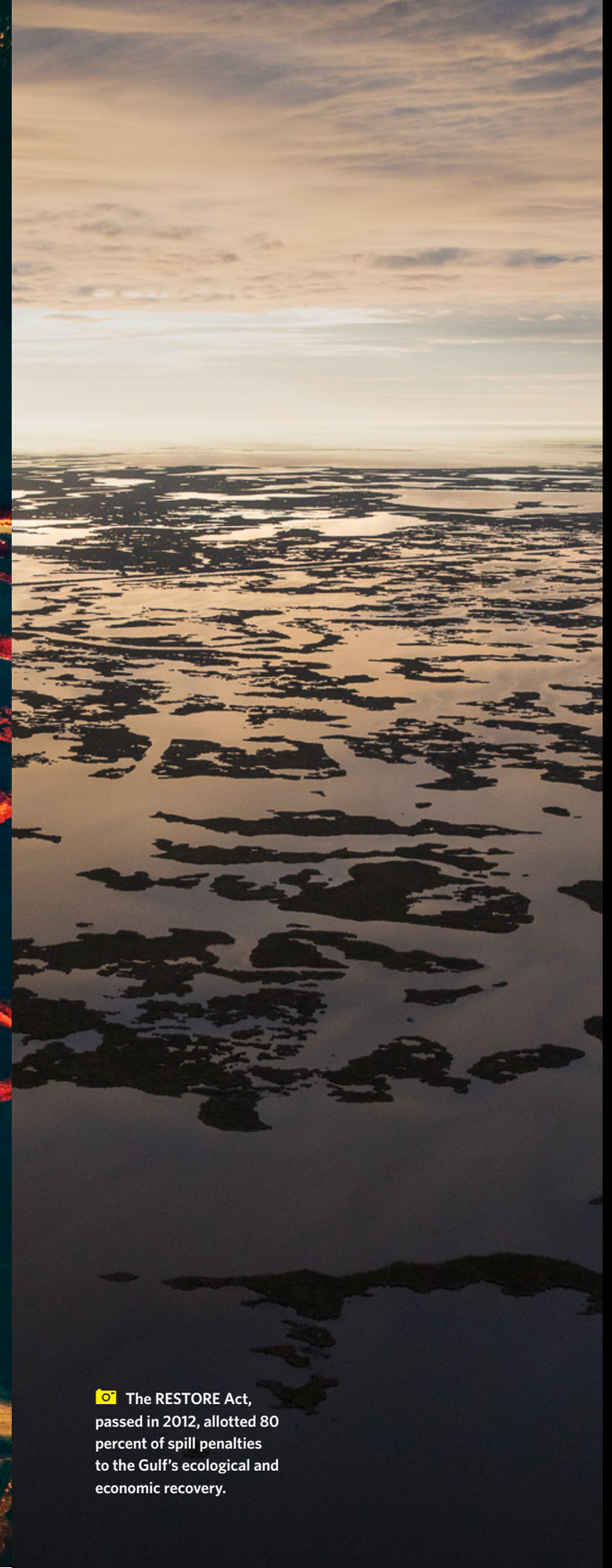
By 2014, drilling was again on the table from New Jersey to Florida. As communities rose to fight development, Henderson became a go-to knowledge source. He spoke in several states and always brought his photos and videos from the BP disaster. "My approach was to show people the impact this industry would have on your beaches, your wetlands, your bays, and how it would endanger industries like tourism and fishing," he says.

The East Coast has thus far fended away offshore drilling, despite incredible pressure—now brought by the Trump administration—to open those waters. In fact, the specter of rigs has generated a remarkable bipartisan opposition by politicians and citizens, one that's hard to find for any other environmental issue.

Something was learned that cannot be erased by anyone who sees the photos of the BP spill, of crude-darkened pelican chicks or a graceful heron desperate to fly with tar-gunked wings. Those of us who took them were transformed by the experience. We woke up to the industry's complex web of oil and gas infrastructure—the pipelines, compressors, transfer stations, and refineries, not to mention regular spills and release of emissions and chemicals.

While the Gulf still has problems, and we struggle to wean our society off fossil fuels, we have the knowledge close at hand of the harms that can happen, and this is important. The spill was a wakeup call to the world—because the whole world was watching—that offshore drilling brings environmental and climate risks that extend beyond any one patch of ocean. This must not be forgotten, and I don't think many people have.

Justin Nobel *reported on the spill for* Audubon *and later covered the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries from New Orleans. He' writing a forthcoming book on the sector.*



The RESTORE Act, passed in 2012, allotted 80 percent of spill penalties to the Gulf's ecological and economic recovery.

SLOW BURN

BY ROWAN JACOBSEN

Ten years ago, while reporting on the BP oil spill, I fell hard for the Gulf Coast. Its spectacular wetlands seemed so underappreciated that I devoted the next year of my life to writing about them. In terms of biological richness and diversity, the region is America's crown jewel.

If you care about birds, you know this. Louisiana contains up to 40 percent of the Lower 48's coastal wetlands, right in the perfect spot on the Mississippi Flyway to offer hundreds of species a pit stop on their migrations.

As the massive oil slick descended on the coast, I had two conflicting thoughts. I feared that the oil would destroy this living masterpiece. And I hoped that, whatever happened, the tragedy would spur us to change the irresponsible way we've been treating it.

And I was wrong on both counts. The Gulf Coast is a robust and resilient ecosystem, and it shook off the spill's impacts better than most people expected. In that warm and biologically active environment, oil degrades relatively quickly. But that doesn't mean the Gulf is in good shape. On the contrary, it's deeply imperiled.

After the spill, the Obama administration significantly toughened regulation and enforcement of the offshore industry. But the Trump administration has aggressively weakened that enforcement, even as it pushed to expand offshore drilling. Last year broke records for oil production in the Gulf, and 2020 is projected to be even bigger. An oil spill is just as likely today as it was 10 years ago.

In fact, spills are constant. How could they not be? In the last decade, permits for 941 new wells, including 588 in deep water, were approved in the Gulf, an area plumbed with some 45,000 miles of underwater pipelines. There are close to 30,000 abandoned wells, all slowly corroding. One collapsed well has been gushing upwards of 4,500 gallons of oil a day for 15 years and will likely continue for many more. It may spill far more oil than BP ever did.

But leaking oil is the least of the Gulf's problems. Saltwater is killing its marshes. Part of this is due to rising seas caused by climate change, part to the 10,000-plus miles of canals cut through them by the oil industry, but the major factor is subsidence. The Louisiana coast is a giant pile of mud built by sediment. Constantly settling, it depends on replenishment from the Mississippi River's annual floods. But since the river was leveed, sediment has stopped coming. More than 2,000 square miles of coast have already disappeared. Places I stood in 2010 no longer exist.

None of this changed because of the spill. But it may still. Billions of dollars of BP's fines are flowing toward Gulf restoration. These landscape-scale projects are the only way to tackle massive challenges like subsidence. They're also the kind of heavy lift that will be required to respond to climate change worldwide. If they succeed, then the spill may not only be an icon of how things go wrong, but also of how we can make them right.

Rowan Jacobsen *is an award-winning author of seven books, including* The Living Shore *and* Shadows on the Gulf. *He reported for* Outside Magazine *during the spill.*

ANOTHER WAY

BY DAVID RINGER

THE FIRST OILED PELICANS I SAW that spring didn't look like the ones they put on TV. They looked almost normal at first, but an odd behavioral tic drew your gaze back to them. Then you saw that their belly feathers hung clumped and matted, looking wet, only this was oil.

Feathers protect birds from a world that is by turns too hot, too cold, too wet, too sunny—but oiled feathers can't do their job. So the pelicans responded the only way they could. They preened, grabbing feather clumps in enormous bills and tugging over and over again. That was the tic that caught your eye, Brown Pelicans stuck in an endless preening loop, unable to save themselves but unable to stop trying. It looked like a form of insanity—I suppose it was—and I still think about the sight with a strangling sense of horror.

Brown Pelicans are highly social beings, flying together in tight, graceful formations and nesting noisily by the hundreds on sheltered islands on the fringes of coasts, feeding at sea. The edge of our world is the beginning of theirs.

They are gentle toward humans, even under stress, the wildlife rehabilitators would tell me. The muscular, seafaring Northern Gannets left triangular gashes on the forearms of people who offered them help they couldn't understand, but the pelicans were patient as their eyeballs and palates were swabbed, quiet as their skin and feathers were scrubbed.

I'd seen the Brown Pelicans at peace, just two weeks before the fog of madness began to seep in. It was evening on Louisiana's California Bay, and the setting sun made the grass look as green as anything in this world. The pelicans packed onto a small island, inches apart, pairs sitting on mound nests on the ground, fearless. They had come off the endangered species list only months prior, the success story of a species rebounding after brutal overhunting and DDT poisoning. The rescue effort had worked. It seemed we'd found a way to live together after all.

And then oil began roaring out of a violent bore in the seafloor, as if eager to make up for eons in the underworld. Eleven men died in chaos and terror. Humanity proved powerless against the onslaught. It would take a few more spins of this Earth around its axis, but wind and tides would bring that oil to the heart of the pelicans' sanctuary.

The oil flowed into the homes and bodies of other birds, too. I'd see adolescent Roseate Spoonbills, their pink feathers brown with oil, drowning Laughing Gulls, and doomed Royal Tern chicks. I would see the human toll too: Servers weeping in restaurants. Businesses shuttered, communities scattered, families separated. Seafood industries in turmoil. Jobs gone. A lost summer of tourism. A couple standing together atop a dune as wave after wave of red and orange oil washed up onto the sand. The Gulf was closed for business.

THE SPILL MARKED ONE MORE stanza in the long, uneasy ballad of our relationships with one another and with all life on Earth. Just five years before, Hurricane Katrina killed more than 1,800 people and wreaked more than $160 billion of havoc. The storm was magnified by decades of environmental degradation that had turned vast wetlands into open water, leaving New Orleans exposed. Katrina's toll was also sharply intensified by human failures and prejudices that left the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and the city's Black and brown residents defenseless in the face of horrendous crisis. When we fail to consider the fullness of one another's humanity in our environmental policies, we deepen cycles of injustice and harm.

We haven't yet learned how to live alongside pelicans, and we haven't learned how to live alongside one another either. As I write, news is breaking of one billion animals dead from Australia's wildfires, on top of immense human cost. Ice is melting, seas are rising, coral reefs are bleaching, extinctions are accelerating, peoples are displaced, and droughts are deepening. In 2010, we saw people, birds, dolphins, and turtles suffer and die amid Deepwater Horizon's flames and oil. Today, the scale of suffering and death unfolding as our climate warms boggles the mind, activating all our individual and collective defense mechanisms. Block. Stop. Deny. Distract. Exploit.

In the Gulf, the best-funded environmental restoration initiative in world history is underway, cause for great hope. At the same time, our government is slashing environmental safeguards with abandon, even the venerable Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which defended all those birds in the Gulf and held BP financially accountable for its harm.

By now, we know very well that human economic and social wellbeing depend on a clean and healthy environment. In such challenging times, we must boldly reimagine how we will relate to that environment and to one another.

I imagine that as a society, we could build a set of environmental policies and practices that lift up every person, not just the most able, fortunate, or powerful, and certainly not just those of one favored race or class. I imagine we could be brave enough to treat every other human being as fully equal to ourselves.

I imagine too that we could build into those environmental policies and practices a commitment to the innate worth and independence of all species with whom we share this planet, from Brown Pelicans to bald cypresses. I imagine that we could value their lives beyond the utility they lend our own.

These are not primarily scientific challenges. They are choices of morality, of politics, of faith, of will. What do you choose, and what are you going to do about it?

David Ringer, *working in the Gulf for Audubon, was deeply involved in the emergency spill response in 2010. He's now Audubon's Chief Network Officer.*

Oiled Brown Pelicans wait to be cleaned at a rescue center in Fort Jackson, Louisiana.