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Young Shearwater Chicks at their Most Vulnerable Over Next Few Weeks – Watershed believes this year is crucial for these birds 21st April 2011

Watershed Victoria members are concerned that shearwater chicks about to leave their rookeries for a flight to the Arctic will be threatened by the bright lights of the desalination plant.

"This season has been a particularly bad year for the shearwaters. It is believed that hundreds of thousands of the adult birds died on their way to Australia or on arriving at their rookeries. Although fit, they were poorly provisioned before they left the Arctic last year, many just not having the energy for the flight and others confused and unable to find their burrows or a good feed here on the Bass Coast. We cannot be sure whether the desalination lights made things that bit harder for some birds," said Neil Rankine, Secretary of Watershed, "but we need to do all we can to help the vulnerable chicks as they leave.

"Low adult populations, the wet breeding conditions and possibly low fish stocks mean we don't expect to see very many young chicks this year. The adult birds left some time ago on their northern migration. The chicks will be departing over the next few weeks and especially now that there are likely to be so few, we would like to do all we can to assist these individuals.

"The chicks are known to be affected by bright lights and the intrusion of the desalination plant with its excessive lighting on their migration path presents a direct threat to them. Watershed brought this issue to the attention of AquaSure, the consortium building the desalination plant, last year", said Mr Rankine.

AquaSure have agreed to dim their lights for a short period and have put in place plans to rescue birds within their fences for transfer to Phillip Island Nature Park rangers during the time of the chicks' migration. Conveniently, this brief period coincides with the Easter holiday when few workers will be at the plant, and hence, less lighting will be needed anyway. As with most activity on the site, the detail of the action plan is not being made public.

Phillip Island Nature Park Rangers will be patrolling nightly from San Remo to the Penguin Parade and they should be contacted in the first instance if anyone sees a bird in distress. Watershed volunteers will monitor roads and beaches near the plant to alert rangers to birds in trouble and to see that all that can be done is being done. The team can be contacted on 0413 902571.

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