



that the death toll at sea could be 10 times the shoreline body count.

RSPCA South West senior animal collection officer Roy Blackburn said staff, Weymouth RSPB colleagues and an army of helpers braved bitter conditions to catch 250 birds on Monday and more than 100 yesterday but more than 1,700 birds could have escaped the rescue operation.

He added: "For every one we catch there are four or five which escape to sea or dive away from us.

"We had reports yesterday of 50 oiled birds in the lagoon between Chickerell and Abbotsbury with 40 more off Portland Bill, but we couldn't get to them until the afternoon when the tide had gone down."

Oiled birds have also been found at a variety of places including Weymouth Esplanade, with many more at Chesil Cove, along Chesil Beach and some as far afield as Lulworth, Kimmeridge Bay, St Aldhelm's Head and Durlston Head in Purbeck.

Mr Blackburn added: "The tides changed yesterday, with most oiled birds being washed up in Devon.

"It gave us a breathing space to catch up with our operation at the Chesil Beach Centre, but birds were still coming in there all the time."

Rescued birds are taken to the RSPCA centre near Taunton or overspill centres.

Some are razorbills and gulls but most are guillemots which have washed up along Chesil Beach and at Portland Bill, having recently returned to cliff ledges on Portland where they breed over spring and summer.

Portland Bill has one of the largest guillemot colonies in the south, with several hundred birds congregating on the cliffs there each summer.

RSPB South West seabird specialist Helen Booker said: "Guillemots start congregating at their breeding sites at this time of year and if birds are among those oiled then this could have a dramatic effect on the colony"

Police roadblocks went up yesterday closing all roads into Branscombe Beach in Devon, which is littered with goods from *Napoli* being taken by hordes of people.

Portland Coastguard district operations manager Mark Rodaway, who is acting receiver of wreck, said that what was going on was 'nothing short of looting'. He added: "There was every effort made in the early stages to secure the site but the numbers that actually turned out on to the beach were unexpected.

"What I witnessed were crates that were previously sealed being forced open with jemmy bars and the contents strewn around on the beach."

Mr Rodaway said that was equivalent to theft and that it would be possible to pursue people who had been pictured taking items from the beach.

He said: "I would rather use education than enforcement but clearly if we are left with no alternative, that is an option open to me."

Mr Rodaway urged anyone who had taken items from the beach to return them as soon as possible.

His comments came after looters ransacked £130,000-worth of a woman's personal belongings, including family heirlooms, being transported on the ship from Sweden to South Africa.

Mr Rodaway condemned the looters and said their actions had increased the environmental impact at Branscombe by 800 per cent.

He added that powers could be used to make people give up items taken.

The MCA accused the scavengers, some of whom carried babies onto the beach, of 'crass greed'.

Unwanted objects have been strewn the length of the beach, quadrupling the clean-up task.

*Napoli* was carrying 2,394 containers of which 103 have been swept overboard. More than 70 of those lost have now been accounted for.