

**Ranger Rick and his friends**  
**Adventure #140 Troubled Waters**  
**By Lee Stowell Cullen**

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“This is my kind of country, Rick!” said Mollie Muskrat as she sniffed and poked along the marshy ground.

“Well, it’s not mine!” growled Cubby Bear. “My feet are soaking wet. Isn’t there any dry land around here, Rick?”

“Sure, Cubby,” answered Rick, “but we have a little farther to go before we reach the beach.”

Ranger Rick, Mollie, Cubby, and Ollie Otter were celebrating the Year of the Coast by visiting some of the places along the shores of the beautiful Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.

Ollie was especially happy. Wherever they went there was plenty of delicious food for him to eat. The marshes were teeming with life. The only thing he missed just a little bit was a nice long mud slide.

“Hey, Cubby,” Ollie called, “stand up on your hind legs and see if there’s anything ahead that looks like a hill. I’m ready for a good long slide.”

Cubby, eager to please his friend, stood up quickly – too quickly! He lost his balance and toppled over backward. With a big splash he disappeared in the marsh grass. “Help!” he yelled. “I’m drowning!”

Ranger Rick laughed. “In two feet of water, you cousin-of-a-polar-bear?! Here, take my paw.” Leaning over, Rick helped up a soaking wet Cubby.

Just as Cubby started to shake the water from his fur, a great roar filled the air.

Frightened by the noise, the animals crouched down in the marsh grass. The roar grew louder and louder. Then, suddenly, right over their heads flew a big red and white helicopter.

“U.S. Coast Guard!” Rick yelled. “What are they doing flying so low?”

A moment later another Coast Guard helicopter came roaring overhead.

“Something’s up,” said Rick after it had gone. “We’d better find out what’s going on!”

With Rick leading the way, the animals soon reached the edge of a sandy beach.

Rick stood up. “Oh, wow!” he cried, straining to get a better look out across the bay.

The other animals stood up too. Ollie gasped. “Look at the way those waves are pounding that oil tanker out there. The ship is breaking up, Rick! That’s why the Coast Guard is here!”

“You’re right, Ollie. They’re probably out to rescue the crew. That ship must have run aground in the storm we had the other day. If she’s full of oil, it means big trouble!”

“I don’t understand,” said Cubby.

“Come on,” Rick said. “Let’s walk farther down the beach. I think I can show you just what I mean by trouble!”

The four friends hadn't gone very far when Mollie stopped dead in her tracks.

"Look at all that black goo up ahead. Is that oil, Rick? It smells terrible!"

"It sure is, Mollie. It's from the ship, and that goo means a lot of birds and other sea creatures are going to get sick or die! That oil will also poison seafood from the bay that people eat, such as crabs, clams, and oysters."

The friends stood silently, staring out at the awful scene.

Suddenly there was a rustle in the marsh grass nearby. A great blue heron walked toward them. Its feet and some of its wing feathers were black with oil.

"Hi! I'm Ranger Rick, and these are my friends from Deep Green Wood," said Rick. "Let's see if we can help you clean off some of that oil."

"Thank you," said the heron. "My name is Susie and I'm lucky I'm not more messed up. You should see what's happening farther down the beach where all those people are. There must be hundreds of ducks and other birds covered with oil. The people are trying to help them, but there isn't an awful lot they can do."

"You know, we birds are in trouble even if we don't get covered with oil. That black stuff has already been washed way into the marsh by the tides and wind. And that means our food supply could be ruined. If the oil doesn't kill the things we eat, it gets into their bodies. Then when we eat them, it gets into our bodies and makes us sick!"

"Gosh, Rick," exclaimed Ollie, "oil spills are really terrible, aren't they?"

"They sure are, Ollie. And when they hit an estuary like this, they're a disaster."

"An estuary? What's that?" asked Molly.

"An estuary is a place where a river meets the sea," answered Rick. "The Chesapeake Bay, with four large rivers flowing into it, is the biggest estuary in the world! Countless birds stop here to feed. And thousands and thousands of sea creatures lay their eggs and raise their young here. An estuary as big as the Chesapeake is a source of food for great numbers of animals and people too."

"We've had spills on the bay before," said Susie as Ollie wiped the last bit of oil from her feathers. "But now that people are building tankers as long as three football fields, even more terrible things can happen if one of them breaks up."

"I know," said Rick. "And don't forget, tanker wrecks aren't the only problem. Oil wells drilled in the sea floor sometimes 'blow out', or break open, and spill thousands of gallons. Much more pollution comes from tanker crews cleaning out their empty tanks. They often dump the leftover oil into the ocean – on purpose! The spill here is terrible, but it's only a drop in the bucket."

"Looks like a pretty big drop to me," said Ollie. "Think I'll take a closer look." Always curious, he wandered farther down the beach to where the people were trying to rescue some of the oil-covered birds. He watched them from the safety of the tall grass. It was a sad sight. The once-beautiful birds were now covered with thick black oil. Dead and dying fish floated along the edge of the beach. The sand was covered with the sticky mess.

As Ollie watched, he heard a faint sound in the reeds beside him. He looked down. There, struggling to walk, was a duck. It, too, was coated with oil.

"What are you doing here?" Ollie asked in surprise.

"I'm in terrible trouble," the duck whispered. "I can hardly move. When I tried to swim, I almost sank. When I tried to clean the oil off my feathers, I got very sick. Can you help me?"

“I’ll try,” said Ollie. He picked the duck up very gently. “We’ll see what my friends and I can do for you.”

“Rick!” he called as he got closer to where the others were standing. “This guy is in awful shape. We’ve got to help him!” But by the time Ollie reached Rick and started to hand the bird to him, it was too late. The duck was dead.

No one knew what to say. Finally Rick spoke up. “Just one of thousands to die,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “Just one of thousands!”

“Isn’t there anything anyone can do?” asked Susie.

“Yes,” Rick answered. “People could build safer ships and make sure worn-out ones are sent to the scrap heap. They could also make sure that all of the captains from every country know how to run their huge tankers.”

“And another thing,” added Susie. “I’ll bet that if people didn’t waste oil when they used it, they wouldn’t need as much. That would mean fewer tankers would be needed to carry it.”

“Fewer tankers, fewer chances of one breaking up!” exclaimed Ollie.

“That’s right,” said Rick. “And besides saving energy, people can use other kinds of energy – like the good old sun.”

“So there’s hope?” asked Susie.

“There’s always hope,” said Rick. “So long as people care enough to do what’s best for all – for people and for wildlife. Right now, I think all of us should do our best to help those sick birds up there on the beach. Let’s go!”

The End.