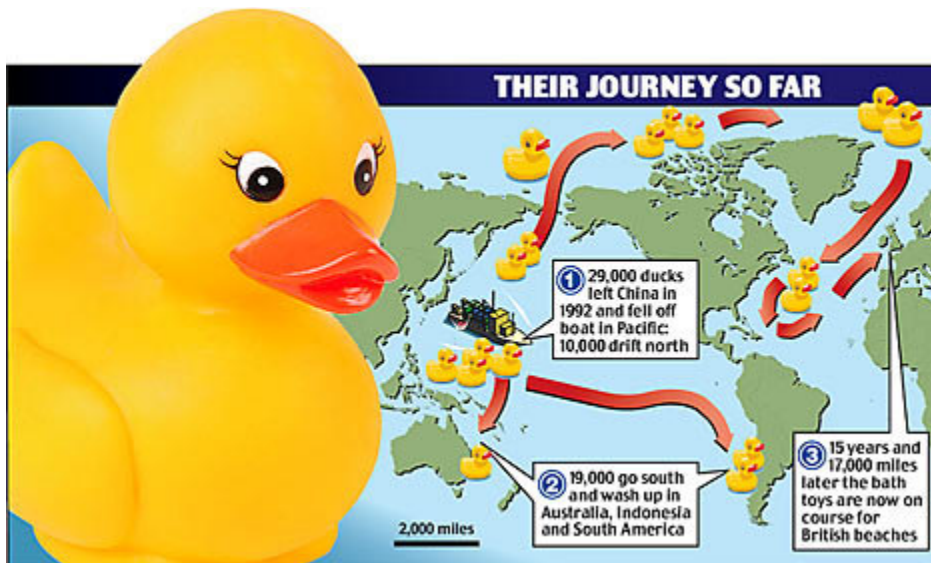


Thousands of rubber ducks to land on British shores after 15 year journey

They were toys destined only to bob up and down in nothing bigger than a child's bath - but so far they have floated halfway around the world.

The armada of 29,000 plastic yellow ducks, blue turtles and green frogs broke free from a cargo ship 15 years ago. Since then they have travelled 17,000 miles, floating over the site where the Titanic sank, landing in Hawaii and even spending years frozen in an Arctic ice pack. And now they are heading straight for Britain. At some point this summer they are expected to be spotted on beaches in South-West England.

While the ducks are undoubtedly a loss to the bath-time fun of thousands of children, their adventures at sea have proved an invaluable aid to science.



The toys have helped researchers to chart the great ocean currents because when they are spotted bobbing on the waves they are much more likely to be reported to the authorities than the floats which scientists normally use. And because the toys are made of durable plastic and are sealed watertight, they have been able to survive years adrift at the mercy of the elements.

Boxes of the bathtime toys - made in China for the U.S. firm The First Years Inc - were washed overboard in the eastern Pacific Ocean one stormy January night in 1992 and broke open. In the intervening time an oceanographer, Curtis Ebbesmeyer, has devoted his retirement to tracking the little yellow ducks and their friends over 17,000 miles, and it is he who has predicted that this summer they will land in the West of England. Mr Ebbesmeyer said: 'We're getting reports of ducks being washed up on America's eastern seaboard. "It is now inevitable that they will get caught up in the Atlantic currents and

will turn up on English beaches. "Cornwall and the South-West will probably get the first wave of them."



THE JOURNEY SO FAR:

10 JANUARY 1992: Somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean nearly 29,000 First Years bath toys, including bright yellow rubber ducks, are spilled from a cargo ship in the Pacific Ocean.

16 NOVEMBER 1992: Caught in the Subpolar Gyre (counter-clockwise ocean current in the Bering Sea, between Alaska and Siberia), the ducks take 10 months to begin landing on the shores of Alaska.

EARLY 1995: The ducks take three years to circle around. East from the drop site to Alaska, then west and south to Japan before turning back north and east passing the original drop site and again landing in North America. Some ducks are even found In Hawaii. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) worked out that the ducks travel approximately 50 per cent faster than the water in the current.

1995 - 2000: Some intrepid ducks escape the Subpolar Gyre and head North, through the Bering Strait and into the frozen waters of the Arctic. Frozen into the ice the ducks travel slowly across the pole, moving ever eastward.

2000: Ducks begin reaching the North Atlantic where they begin to thaw and move Southward. Soon ducks are sighted bobbing in the waves from Maine to Massachusetts.

2001: Ducks are tracked in the area where the Titanic sank.

JULY TO DECEMBER 2003: The First Years company offers a \$100 savings bond reward for the recovery of wayward ducks from the 1992 spill. To be valid ducks must be sent to the company and must be found in New England, Canada or Iceland. Britain is told to prepare for an invasion of the wayward ducks as well.

2003: A lawyer called Sonali Naik was on holiday in the Hebrides in north-west Scotland when she found a faded green frog on the beach marked with the magic words 'The First Years'. Unaware of the significance of her find she left it on the beach. It was only when she was chatting to other guests at her hotel that she realised what she had seen.

By BEN CLERKIN