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A “stranding” occurs when a marine mammal is either:

- Dead, whether found on the beach or floating in the water;
- Alive, on a beach, but unable to return to the water;
- Alive, on a beach, and in need of apparent medical attention; or
- Alive, in the water, and unable to return to its natural habitat without assistance.

Additional Information

For additional details, please refer to the 2018 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: United States.

All images were taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo (top): An adult male Steller sea lion hauled out of Sitka Sound and sought shelter in an abandoned doorway. Photo: Sitka Fire Department.



2018 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: Alaska Region

The U.S. Marine Mammal Stranding Response Network is comprised of more than 120 organizations that provide first response capabilities for cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) and pinnipeds (seals, and sea lions) that are sick, injured, in distress, in peril, or dead. These responses are authorized and overseen by NOAA Fisheries’ Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.



Figure AKR-1: NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region (AKR).

Alaska Region

The NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region (Figure AKR-1) encompasses approximately 33,904 miles¹ of coastline and includes several large bodies of water (Beaufort Sea, Chukchi Sea, Bering Sea, and Gulf of Alaska). Given the size and remoteness of Alaska, this region contains some of the least visited coastline in the United States. The 325 confirmed marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region in 2018 is higher than its 12-year (2006–2017) average ($n = 188 \pm 62$).

1 <https://coast.noaa.gov/data/docs/states/shorelines.pdf>

What Types of Marine Mammals Strand in the Alaska Region?

More than 25 species of marine mammals can be found in the waters of Alaska, with the majority of stranding reports in 2018 involving pinnipeds (Figure AKR-2). Common pinniped species that strand in Alaska include the bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*), harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*), ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*), spotted seal (*Phoca largha*), and Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*) (Table AKR-1 and Figure AKR-3). Large whale species such as gray (*Eschrichtius robustus*), humpback (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), and bowhead (*Balaena mysticetus*) whales are known to strand. The region also has many small cetacean species including the beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*), harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), and killer whale (*Orcinus orca*). Belugas may live-strand when molting or chasing prey in shallow habitats, or if they are suffering from injuries or disease. Belugas may also mass strand during tidal fluctuations, which can be significant in Cook Inlet. Unlike other whales and dolphins, healthy belugas that live-strand are usually able to refloat themselves during the next high tide, but some have died after live-stranding on their sides and inhaling mud and/or water. In 2018, eight Stejneger's beaked whales (*Mesoplodon stejnegeri*)—a poorly understood, elusive, and deep-diving species—stranded on Adak Island in the Aleutian Islands. A mass stranding of this size is a rare occurrence, and this event was the largest known mass stranding ever recorded for this species.²

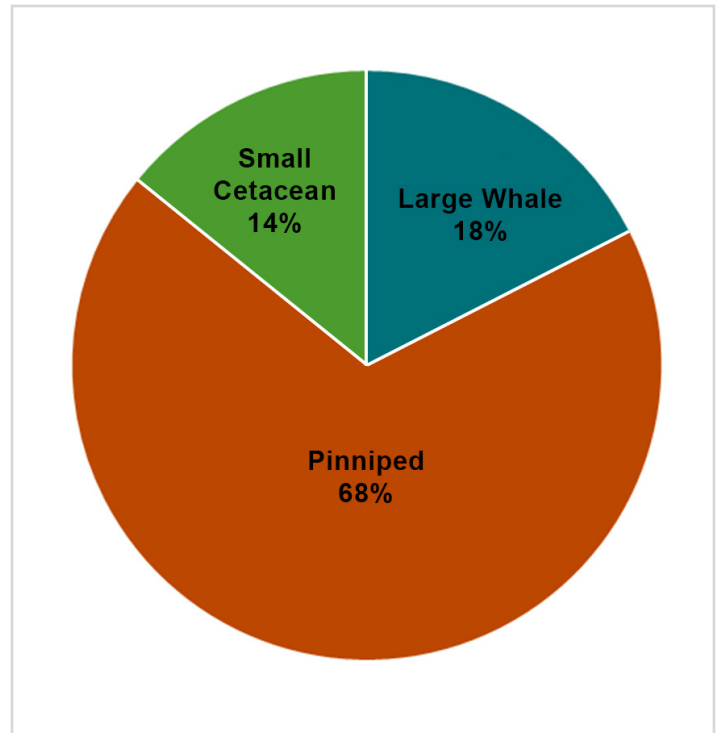


Figure AKR-2: Alaska Region marine mammal strandings, 2018 (n=325, including n=28 unknown cetaceans not shown).



Photo (left): Remains of a large baleen whale that stranded close to Anchorage, Alaska. Photo: University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Table AKR-1: Five most frequently stranded marine mammal species in the Alaska Region, 2018.

Species	Confirmed Stranding Reports 2018	12-Year Average \pm Standard Deviation ³ (2006-2017)
Ringed Seal	44	17 \pm 25
Bearded Seal	38	7 \pm 4
Steller Sea Lion	29	36 \pm 7
Harbor Seal	28	28 \pm 11
Spotted Seal	22	4 \pm 3

² [What Caused the Largest Known Mass Stranding of Stejneger's Beaked Whales?](#) Also, see Savage, K.N., Burek-Huntington, K., Wright, S.K., Bryan, A.L., Sheffield, G., Webber, M., Stimmelmayer, R., Tuomi, P., Delaney, M.A. and Walker, W., 2021. Stejneger's beaked whale strandings in Alaska, 1995–2020. *Marine Mammal Science*.

³ A standard deviation is a measure used to quantify the amount of variation within a set of values.

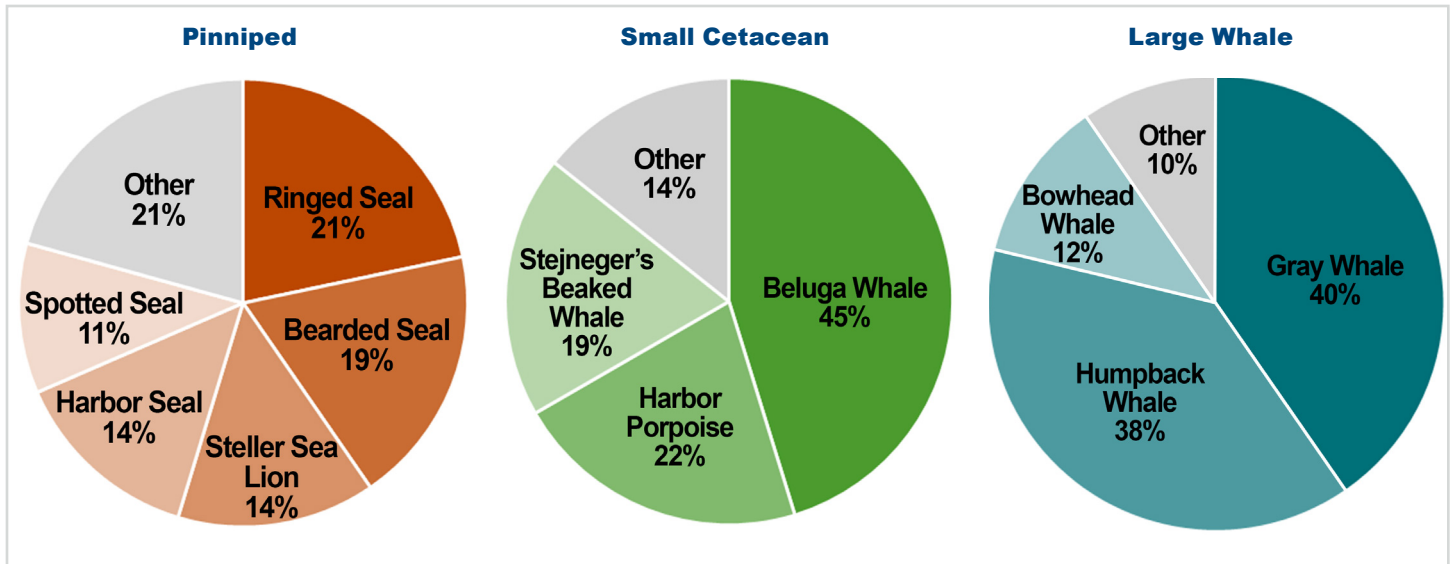
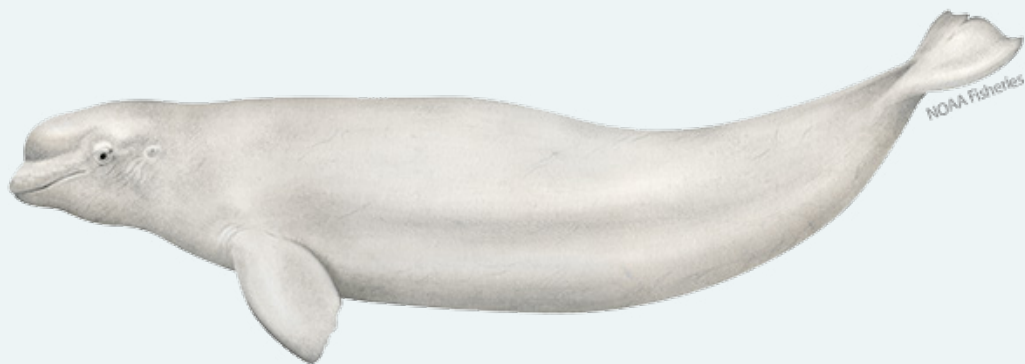


Figure AKR-3: Alaska Region marine mammal strandings, by species, 2018 (n=325). Pinniped (n=203), small cetacean (n=42), large whale (n=52), and unknown cetacean (n=28, not shown).

Species in the Spotlight



Cook Inlet Beluga Whale⁴ (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

Cook Inlet beluga whales are an endangered population, and one of NOAA Fisheries' "Species in the Spotlight." The population has shown ongoing decline in recent years, and has not shown signs of recovery. Cook Inlet beluga whales exhibit seasonal shifts in distribution and habitat use within Cook Inlet, but they stay in the inlet throughout their lives. The whales' seasonal shifts appear to be related to corresponding changes in their physical environment (e.g., ice formation in winter) and food sources, specifically the timing of fish runs. Despite increased management and recovery efforts, the Cook Inlet beluga population faces many threats including: disturbance from vessels and industries (e.g., oil and gas), noise pollution, and contaminants. **In 2018, seven Cook Inlet beluga whales were reported stranded to the National Stranding Network.** For more information on the Species in the Spotlight initiative, please visit:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/species-spotlight-action-plan-accomplishments>

⁴ All species illustrations are not to scale relative to each other.

When Did Marine Mammals in the Alaska Region Strand in 2018?

The Alaska Region has many year-round or seasonally resident populations of marine mammals, and the numbers of stranded animals are elevated in the summer months (Figure AKR-4). The spike in pinniped strandings beginning in June 2018 can be mostly attributed to the Alaska Ice Seal Unusual Mortality Event (UME) which saw elevated strandings of bearded, ringed, and spotted seals in the Bering and Chukchi seas. In general, increased marine mammal strandings in summer months is likely a reflection of the high number of animals that use Alaska waters in the spring and summer as their feeding grounds, such as gray whales, which migrate from their winter grounds in Mexico along the west coasts of the United States and Canada to feed in Alaska waters in late spring/early summer. The number of marine mammal strandings reported to the network may also be higher during the summer, due to increased human activity in the marine environment and stranding response capabilities during the spring/summer months as the severe winters limit response efforts, especially in remote areas of Alaska.

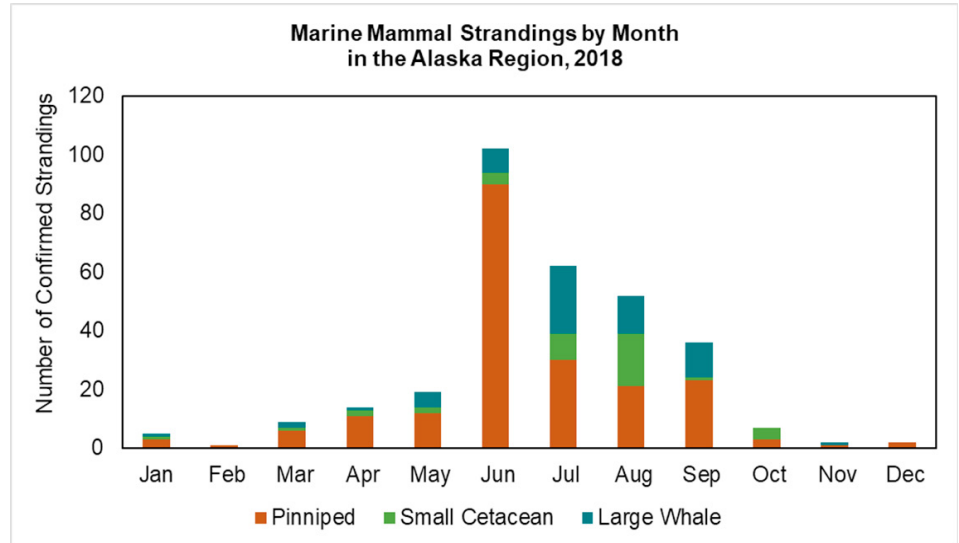


Figure AKR-4: Seasonality of marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region, 2018.

Are Marine Mammals in the Alaska Region Stranding Alive or Dead?

In 2018, the largest proportion (90 percent) of strandings in Alaska reported to the network involved dead animals (Figure AKR-5). As most areas are remote, and network capabilities are limited due to location, the condition and identification of stranded animals cannot always be confirmed. Based on the recommendations of authorized veterinarians or professionals, some live animals were transported to the region's only marine mammal rehabilitation center, the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward; others were poor candidates for rehabilitation and either died on their own or were euthanized. Of the six animals admitted to rehabilitation in 2018 (pinniped=6), 33 percent (n=2) were released.

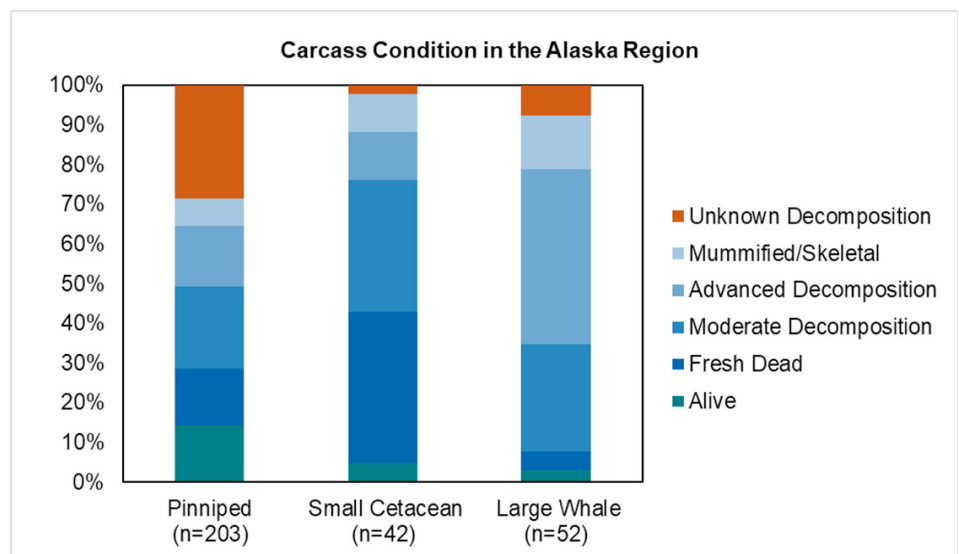


Figure AKR-5: The condition of stranded marine mammals on initial observation in the Alaska Region, 2018.

Photo (right): Members of the Stranding Network examine a moderately decomposed harbor porpoise. Photo: University of Alaska Fairbanks.



What Types of Unusual Mortality Events Were Occurring in the Alaska Region?

Although the Alaska Ice Seal UME was not officially declared until 2019, elevated ice seal strandings occurred in the Bering and Chukchi seas in 2018, and these animals were included as part of the UME investigation.

Alaska Ice Seal UME



Bearded Seal



Ringed Seal



Spotted Seal

First Declared: Although not officially declared until 2019, elevated ice seal strandings began in 2018

Status in 2018: Retrospectively added to the UME

Number of new cases in 2018: 112

Primary Causes and Findings: Undetermined; stranded seals were mainly weaned pups or juveniles (<2 years old) and were thin with evidence of malnutrition

Locations of Cases: Bering and Chukchi seas

Protected Status: Listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (bearded and ringed seals); not listed as threatened or endangered (spotted seal)

More information about UMEs is available at:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-unusual-mortality-events>



Photo (above): Dead spotted seal stranding near Kotzebue, Alaska. Photo: U.S. National Park Service.

What Can Members of the Public Do?



A humpback whale raises its fluke out of the water signaling the start of a terminal dive. Photo: Christian Miller.

Alaska Regional 24/7 Hotline

The Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program relies on reports of stranded marine mammals by the public. If you come across a stranded marine mammal, please report it to your Alaska regional 24/7 hotline.

Hotline: (877) 925-7773

Report a Stranding

When reporting a stranded marine mammal, please include the following information:

- Date
- Location of stranding (including latitude and longitude)
- Number of animals
- Condition of the animal (alive or dead)
- Species (if known)

Photos or videos (from a safe and legal distance of 100 yards, unless greater restrictions apply) can also provide valuable information to Network responders. Only trained and permitted responders should approach or pick up a stranded marine mammal. You can also download the Dolphin & Whale 911 Stranding App in the Apple Store to help report a stranding.

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Get Involved

The National Stranding Network relies on government, private, and public support to conduct its vital work to save animals in distress and understand causes of injuries and mortalities.

You can make a difference by contacting your local Stranding Network (list available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/report>) to see how you can get involved.

Only confirmed stranding activities involving species under the jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries (cetaceans and pinnipeds, except walrus) are included in this report. All data were obtained, analyzed, and validated from the NOAA Fisheries National Marine Mammal Stranding Database. Any duplicate events, and entries of entangled large whales, were removed from the following analyses. All data and information described within this report are correct as of September 22, 2020 (when the data query of the National Stranding Database was performed). All photographs were taken under Stranding Agreement, Section 109(h) authority, or NMFS research permits.