NOAA FISHERIES

Office of Protected Resources

2018 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: Southeast Region

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.*

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, inured, 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.

Southeast Region

The NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region includes eight coastal states from North Carolina through Texas, as well as the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (Figure SER-1). This region encompasses approximately 29,952 miles[1] of coastline and includes several large bodies of water (the U.S. south Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean). The region contains some of the most visited coastline in the United States (i.e., Florida), but also some very remote areas. The 812 confirmed marine mammal strandings in the Southeast Region in 2018 is similar to its 12-year (2006–2017) average (n=785 ± 197).

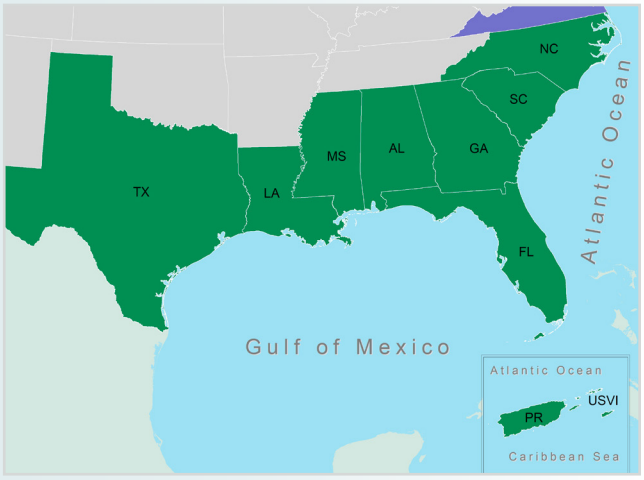


Figure SER-1: NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region (SER).

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): Recovery of an adult Blainville's beaked whale (*Mesoplodon densirostris*) which stranded on Kure Beach, North Carolina. Photo: Ann Pabst/University of North Carolina Wilmington.

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

What Types of Marine Mammals Strand in the Southeast Region?

More than 35 different species of marine mammals can be found in the waters of the southeastern United States, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean, with the majority of stranding reports involving small cetaceans (Figure SER-2; Table SER-1). Frequently stranded small cetacean species include common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), pygmy sperm whales (*Kogia breviceps*), dwarf sperm whales (*Kogia sima*), and Gervais' beaked whales (*Mesoplodon europaeus*). Large whale species such as humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), and North Atlantic right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) are also known to strand, although rarely and in much lower numbers (Figure SER-3). Pinniped species, such as harbor (*Phoca vitulina*) and gray (*Halichoerus grypus*) seals, only occasionally strand in this region, primarily along the mid-Atlantic coast, which is the extent of their range in the Southeast.

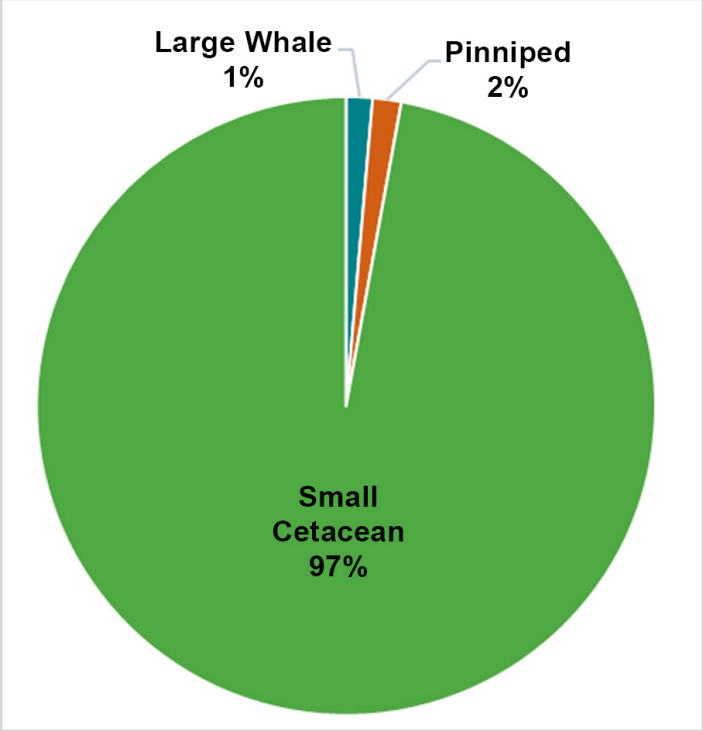


Figure SER-2: Southeast Region marine mammal strandings, 2018 (n=812, including n=9 unknown cetaceans not shown).

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

Species	Confirmed Stranding Reports 2018	12-Year Average ± Standard Deviation[2] (2006-2017)
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	683	626 ± 175
Pygmy Sperm Whale	18	23 ± 7
Dwarf Sperm Whale	11	9 ± 4
Gervais Beaked Whale	10	3 ± 1
Harbor Seal	7	6 ± 4

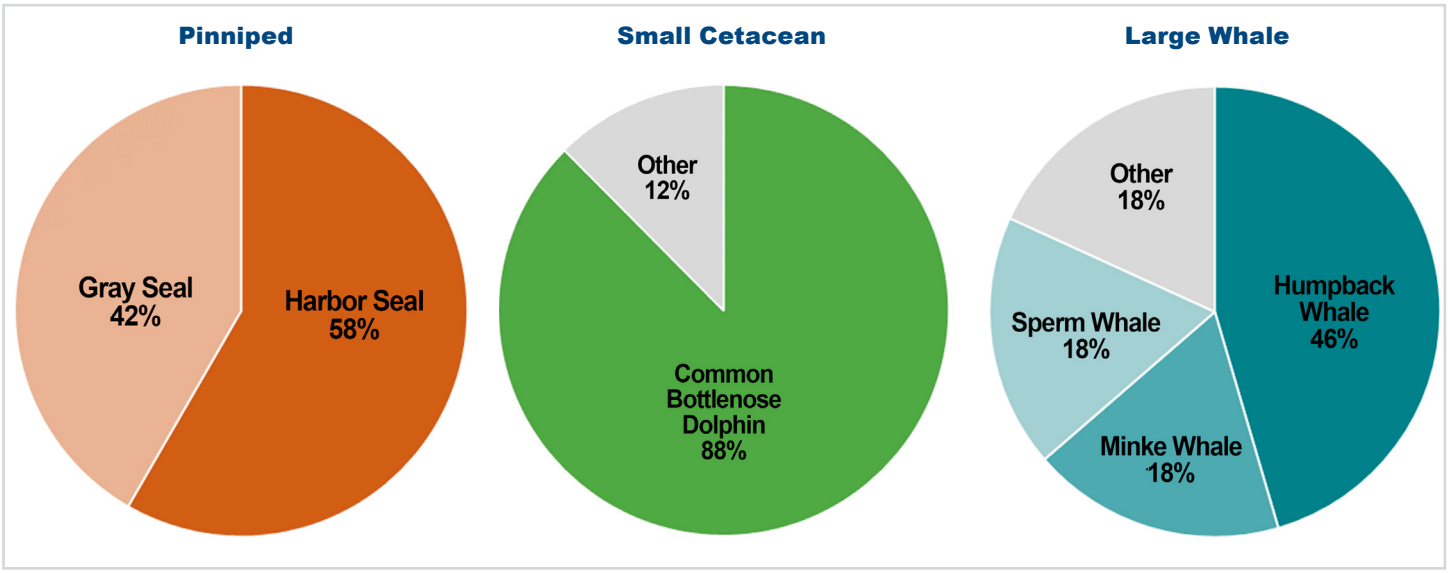


Figure SER-3: Southeast Region marine mammal strandings, by species, 2018 (n=812). Pinniped (n=12), small cetacean (n=780), large whale (n=11), and unknown cetacean (n=9, not shown).

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

Species in the Spotlight

North Atlantic Right Whale[3] *(Eubalaena glacialis)*

North Atlantic right whales are a critically endangered species and one of NOAA Fisheries' "Species in the Spotlight." In the spring, summer, and into the fall, many of these whales can be found in waters off New England and further north into Canadian waters, where they feed and mate. Each fall, some individuals migrate along the East Coast of North America to calving grounds off the southeastern United States. The population has been in decline since 2010, with fewer than 350 individuals[4] remaining and fewer than 100 breeding females. In 2017, NOAA Fisheries declared an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) after several deaths were documented in the United States and Canada. **In 2018, the UME was still ongoing and three dead and five seriously injured[5] whales were additionally documented. At the end of 2018, 27 individual right whales (20 confirmed dead, 7 seriously injured) were included in the UME for the two-year period (2017 and 2018 combined).** The UME continued past 2018; for more information on the current status of the North Atlantic right whale UME, please visit:

https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2017-2021-north-atlantic-right-whale-unusual-mortality-event

Photo (right): An endangered North Atlantic right whale seen in poor health off Jekyll Island, Georgia; determined to be seriously injured, this individual was included in the ongoing Unusual Mortality Event. Photo: Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute.

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

4 For the most recent estimates, please see: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/north-atlantic-right-whale.

5 The MMPA requires NOAA Fisheries to distinguish between injuries to marine mammals that are serious and those that are non-serious. Serious injury determination is a detailed assessment process that uses data, such as body condition and parameters of the human-caused injury, collected from living whales to determine an individual whale's prognosis for survival. A serious injury designation indicates a whale is likely to die from those injuries (although it was alive at its last sighting).

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

In the Southeast Region a number of year-round resident stocks of common bottlenose dolphins live nearshore in bays, sounds, and estuaries. Coastal and offshore stocks of bottlenose dolphins and other cetacean species are also routinely present. In 2018, stranding events occurred throughout the year (Figure SER-4), but strandings were elevated in February and March, which coincided with the calving season for some stocks of common bottlenose dolphin. There was also a spike of small cetacean strandings in the late summer and fall, which can be attributed to the Southwest Florida bottlenose dolphin UME declared in 2018.

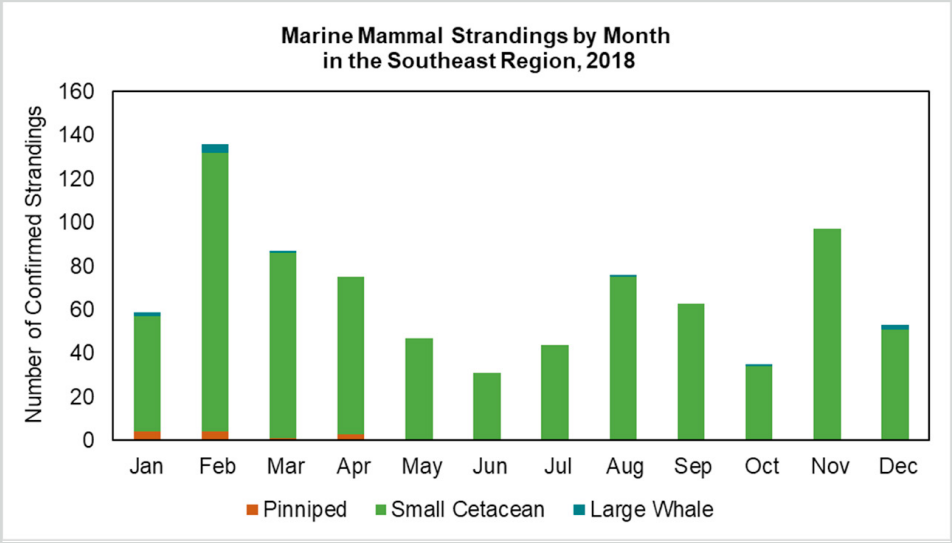


Figure SER-4: Seasonality of marine mammal strandings in the Southeast Region, 2018.

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

Although the majority of marine mammals that strand in the Southeast are found dead, a small proportion (11 percent) of animals stranded alive in 2018 (Figure SER-5). Based on the recommendations of authorized veterinarians or professionals, some live animals were transported to rehabilitation facilities; others were poor candidates for rehabilitation and either died on their own or were euthanized. As so few seals strand in this area, there is only one facility authorized for pinniped rehabilitation in the Southeast Region; pinniped rehabilitation candidates are often transferred to facilities within the Greater Atlantic Region. Of the 10 animals transferred to rehabilitation facilities in 2018 (pinniped=1; small cetacean=9), 20 percent (n=2) were released.

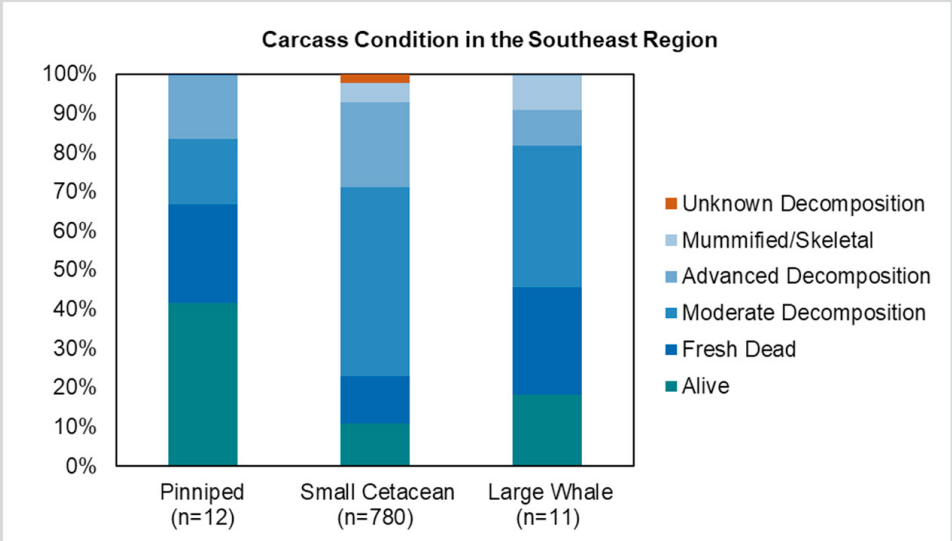


Figure SER-5: The condition of stranded marine mammals on initial observation in the Southeast Region, 2018.

Photo (right): Responders assist a common bottlenose dolphin that live-stranded on Daytona Beach, Florida. Photo: Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute.

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

Two new UMEs were declared in the Southeast Region in 2018:

Atlantic Minke Whale UME

First Declared: Although not officially declared until 2018, elevated minke whale strandings began in 2017

Number of new cases in 2018: 30

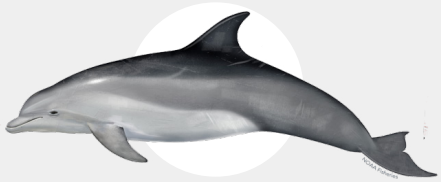
Total number of cases (2017 and 2018 combined): 57

Primary Causes and Findings: Suspect Human interaction (entanglement) and Suspect Infectious disease. Some examined animals had suspected or confirmed evidence of human interaction (entanglement), while others have had findings of suspected or confirmed infectious disease

Locations of Cases: U.S. Atlantic Ocean

Protected Status: Not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act

Southwest Florida Bottlenose Dolphin UME



First Declared: 2018

Number of new cases in 2018: 134

Primary Causes and Findings: Biotoxin exposure. Tissues tested from stranded dolphins were positive for the red tide toxin (brevetoxin)

Location of Cases: Southwest coast of Florida, including Collier, Lee, Charlotte, Sarasota, Manatee, Hillsborough and Pinellas counties

Protected Status: Not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act

In 2018, there were also two ongoing (previously declared) large whale UMEs involving humpback whales and North Atlantic right whales.

North Atlantic Right Whale UME

First Declared: 2017

Status in 2018: Ongoing

Number of new cases in 2018: 8 (3 dead and 5 seriously injured)

Total number of cases (2017 and 2018 combined): 27 (20 dead and 7 seriously injured)

Primary Cause(s): Human interaction (vessel strike, entanglement in rope and gear)

Locations of Cases: U.S. and Canadian Atlantic, including the Gulf of St. Lawrence

Protected Status: Listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (throughout its range)

Atlantic Humpback Whale UME

First Declared: Although not officially declared until 2017, elevated humpback whale strandings began in 2016

Status in 2018: Ongoing

Number of new cases in 2018: 25

Total number of cases (2016, 2017, and 2018 combined): 85

Primary Cause(s): Suspect human interaction (vessel strike)

Locations of Cases: U.S. Atlantic Ocean

Protected Status: In the U.S. Atlantic Ocean, the population is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act

More information about UMEs is available at:
https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-unusual-mortality-events

What Can Members of the Public Do?

Trained responders examine a humpback whale carcass. Photo: Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute.

Southeast 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 Southeast regional 24/7 hotline.

Hotline: (877) 942-5343

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)

Only trained and permitted responders should approach or pick up a stranded marine mammal.

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.

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.

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