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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.

For additional details, please refer to the 2019 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: United States.

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

Photo (top): Stranded gray whale located on a beach along the Nushagak Peninsula. Photo: Alison Eskilin/Alaska Department of Natural Resources.



2019 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: Alaska Region

The U.S. Marine Mammal Stranding Response Network comprises 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: Map of 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 440 total confirmed marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region in 2019 is higher than its 13-year (2006–2018) average ($n=199 \pm 71$). This elevated number is due largely to two Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) that were declared in the Alaska Region in 2019; see below for details.

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 2019 involving pinnipeds (Figure AKR-2). Common pinniped species that strand in Alaska include the bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*), Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*), ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*), and harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*) (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. Groups of belugas may also mass-strand during tidal fluctuations, which can be significant in Cook Inlet. 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.

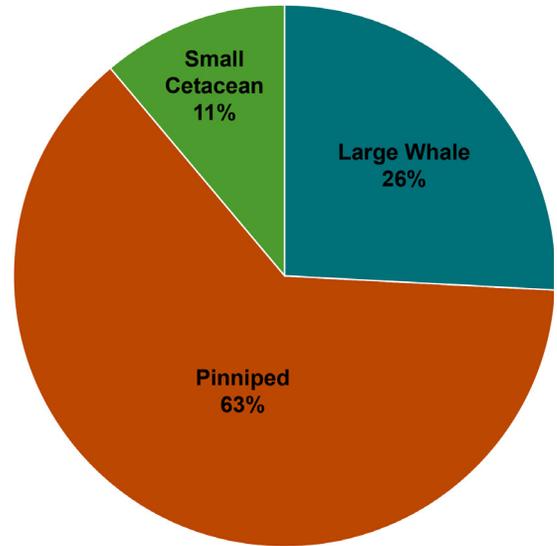


Figure AKR-2: Alaska Region marine mammal strandings, 2019 (n=440, including n=2 unknown cetaceans not shown).

Table AKR-1: Five most frequently stranded marine mammal species in the Alaska Region, 2019.

Species	Confirmed Stranding Reports 2019	13-Year Average ± Standard Deviation ² (2006-2018)
Steller Sea Lion	53	33 ± 13
Bearded Seal	50	9 ± 10
Gray Whale	48	15 ± 5
Ringed Seal	37	15 ± 12
Harbor Seal	32	28 ± 11

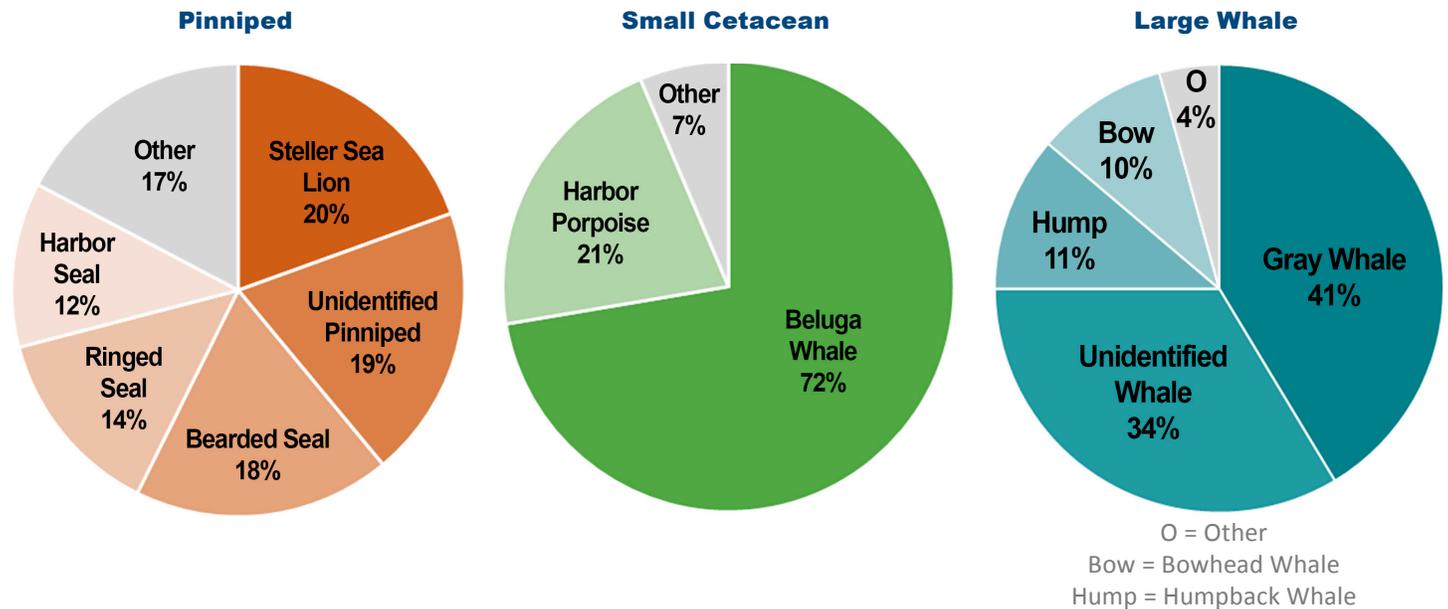
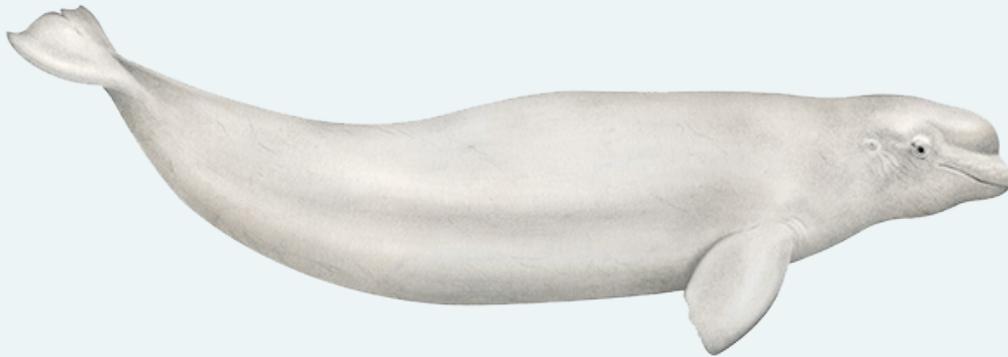


Figure AKR-3: Alaska Region marine mammal strandings, by species, 2019 (n=440). Pinniped (n=275), small cetacean (n=47), large whale (n=116), and unknown cetaceans (n=2, not shown).

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

Species in the Spotlight



Cook Inlet Beluga Whale³ (*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 is not recovering. 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 2019, 19 Cook Inlet beluga whales (13 dead and 6 alive) 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>

Photo (right): Authorized responders from Alaska Veterinary Pathology Service examine an endangered Cook Inlet beluga whale which stranded in Turnagain Arm, within the Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge. Photo: William Carpenter.



³ Species illustrations throughout this report are not to scale relative to each other.

Marine Mammal Strandings by Month in the Alaska Region, 2019

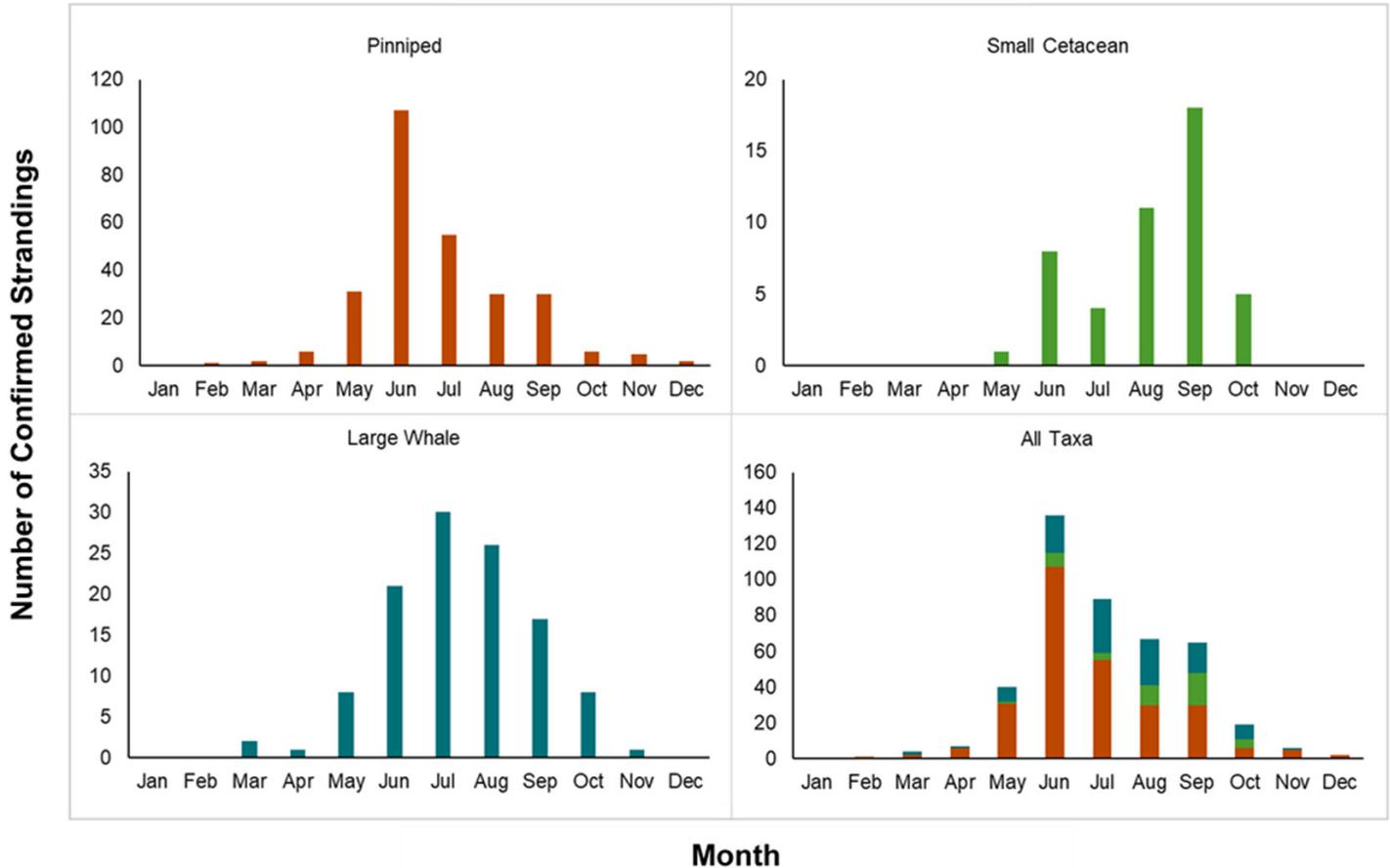


Figure AKR-4: Seasonality of marine mammal strandings in the Alaska Region, 2019. Note: Scale on the Y-axis varies relative to the number of confirmed strandings for each taxon.

When Did Marine Mammals in the Alaska Region Strand in 2019?

The Alaska Region has many year-round or seasonally resident populations of marine mammals, and the numbers of confirmed stranded animals are elevated in the summer months (Figure AKR-4). The 2019 spike in pinniped strandings in June can be mostly attributed to the Alaska Ice Seal UME, which saw elevated strandings of bearded, ringed, and spotted (*Phoca largha*) seals in the Bering and Chukchi seas. Gray whales also stranded in greater numbers throughout the summer and fall, which coincided with the timing of their annual migration north, along the west coasts of the United States and Canada, to summer feeding grounds in Alaska; these elevated strandings (in addition to whales stranding along the rest of the migratory path) were recognized as a UME, and the West Coast Gray Whale UME was declared in 2019. In general, the number of marine mammal strandings reported to the Stranding Network may also be higher during the summer due to seasonal use of Alaska waters by migrating animals (i.e., summer feeding grounds), increased human activity in the marine environment, and stranding response capabilities to confirm reports of stranding events during the spring/summer months as the severe winters limit response efforts, especially in remote areas of Alaska.

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

In 2019, the majority (88 percent) of marine mammal strandings reported in the Alaska Region 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 10 animals admitted to rehabilitation in 2019 (pinniped=10), 50 percent (n=5) were released.

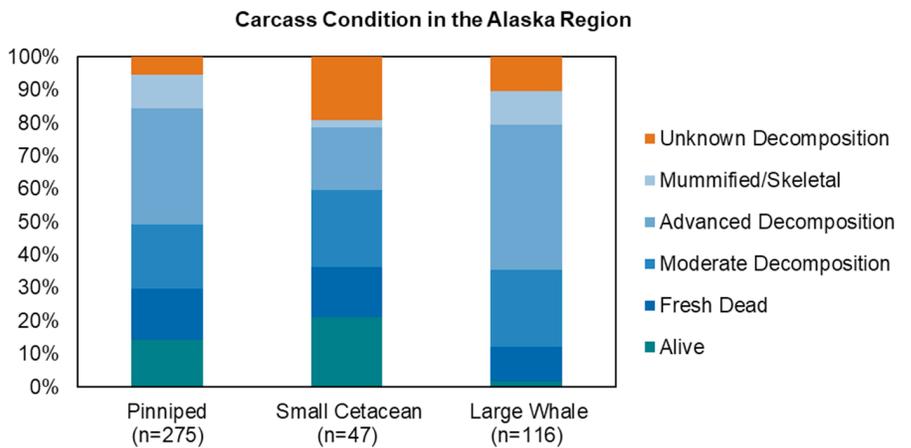


Figure AKR-5: The condition of stranded marine mammals on initial observation in the Alaska Region, 2019.



Photo (above): Ringed seals, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, are one of three pinniped species included in the Alaska Ice Seal UME declared in 2019. Photo: Gay Sheffield/University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Sea Grant.

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



Two UMEs were declared in the Alaska Region in 2019:

West Coast Gray Whale UME



Gray Whale

First Declared: 2019

Number of new cases in 2019: 216 (U.S. = 122; Canada = 11; and Mexico = 83)

Primary Causes and Findings: The preliminary cause of the gray whale UME is undetermined, although mortalities have been linked to killer whale predation, entanglements and vessel strikes, and poor body condition (in some whales) possibly resulting from ecosystem changes in Arctic feeding areas

Locations of Cases: Pacific Ocean (Alaska–Mexico)

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

Alaska Ice Seal UME



Bearded Seal

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

Number of new cases in 2019: 164

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)



Ringed Seal



Spotted Seal

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?



An underweight bearded seal found near Shaktoolik in April 2019 undergoes rehabilitation at the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward. Photo: Alaska SeaLife Center.

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 (note that [regulations apply](#) to certain species and areas) 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.



U.S. Secretary of Commerce
Gina M. Raimondo

Under Secretary of Commerce for
Oceans and Atmosphere
Richard W. Spinrad, Ph.D.

Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
Janet L. Coit

January 2023

www.fisheries.noaa.gov

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Office of Protected Resources
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD, 20910

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 and analyzed from the NOAA Fisheries' National Marine Mammal Stranding Database, and have been verified. Any duplicate events, and entries of entangled large whales, were removed from the analyses. All data and information described within this report are correct as of May 3, 2021 (when the data query of the National Stranding Database was performed). All photographs were taken under Stranding Agreement, MMPA Section 109(h) authority, or NOAA Fisheries research permits.