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Office of Protected  
Resources

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):** An adult male humpback whale carcass washes up on Daytona Beach, Florida. A necropsy revealed healed entanglement scars on the flukes, which suggest this individual was previously entangled. Photo: Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute.

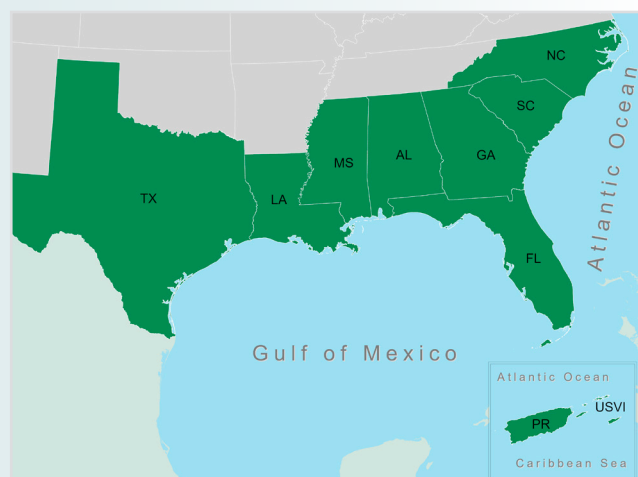


## 2019 Marine Mammal Strandings Overview: Southeast Region

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.

### 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<sup>1</sup> of coastline and includes several large bodies of water (the U.S. South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Sea). The region contains some of the most visited coastline in the United States (i.e., Florida), but also some very remote areas. The 948 total confirmed marine mammal strandings in the Southeast Region in 2019 is similar to its 13-year (2006–2018) average ( $n=787 \pm 189$ ).

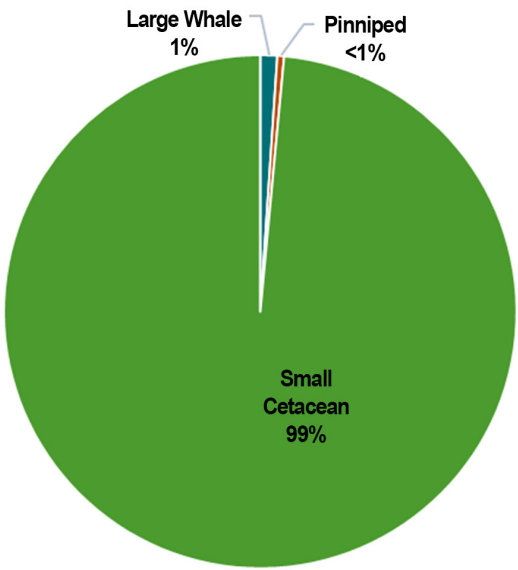


**Figure SER-1:** Map of NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region (SER).

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

# What Types of Marine Mammals Strand in the Southeast Region?

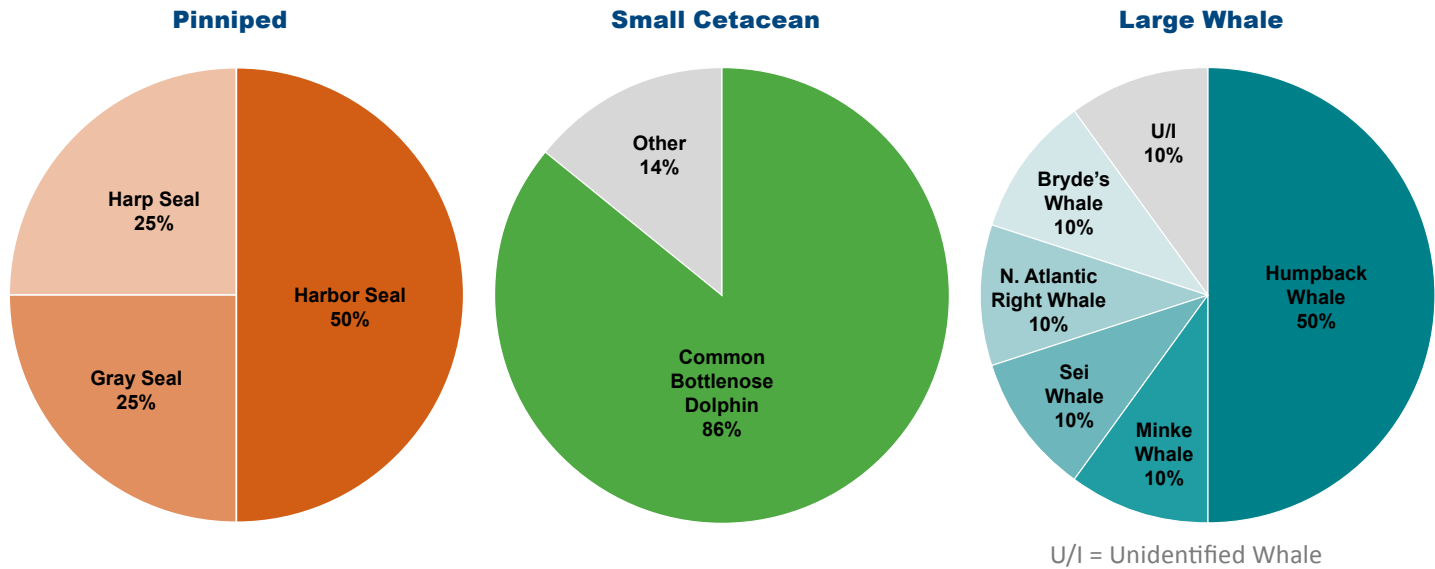
More than 35 species of marine mammals can be found in the waters of the southeastern United States, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean, with the majority of stranding reports involving small cetaceans (Figure SER-2; Table SER-1). Frequently stranded small cetacean species (Table SER-1) include the common bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), short-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*), harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), dwarf sperm whale (*Kogia sima*), and pygmy sperm whale (*Kogia breviceps*). Large whale species such as the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*), North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*), and Rice’s whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*)—formerly the Gulf of Mexico Bryde’s whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*)—are also known to strand, although rarely and in much lower numbers (Figure SER-3). Pinnipeds 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, 2019 (n=948, including n=8 unknown cetaceans not shown).

**Table SER-1:** Five most frequently stranded marine mammal species in the Southeast Region, 2019.

Species	Confirmed Stranding Reports 2019	13-Year Average ± Standard Deviation² (2006-2018)
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	794	630 ± 168
Short-finned Pilot Whale	34	17 ± 16
Harbor Porpoise	13	10 ± 8
Dwarf Sperm Whale	12	9 ± 4
Pygmy Sperm Whale	11	23 ± 6



**Figure SER-3:** Southeast Region marine mammal strandings, by species, 2019 (n=948). Pinniped (n=4), small cetacean (n=926), large whale (n=10), and unknown cetacean (n=8, not shown).

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

## A New Species of Baleen Whale in the Gulf of Mexico: Rice's Whale (*Balaenoptera ricei*)



In January 2019, a large baleen whale stranded and died in the Everglades on the southwestern coast of Florida in the Gulf of Mexico. Members of the Stranding Network<sup>3</sup> and NOAA Fisheries biologists examined the animal and conducted a necropsy to investigate the cause of death. The whale was underweight and

had a sharp, hard piece of plastic (approximately 3" x 2") in its stomach, which may have contributed to the stranding and subsequent death. The entire carcass was collected and cleaned, and the intact skull and skeleton were deposited into the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History collection. Examination of the morphology of the skull supported previous genetic studies<sup>4</sup> that had identified this type of baleen whale from the Gulf of Mexico as distinct from other closely related baleen whale species in the world. The distinct morphological characteristics combined with the high level of genetic divergence led to the classification of these whales in the Gulf of Mexico as a new species called [Rice's whale](#).<sup>5</sup> The Rice's whale is the only resident baleen whale in the Gulf of Mexico, and has been sighted consistently in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico along the continental shelf. **NOAA Fisheries' most recent abundance estimate from 2017–2018 surveys in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico is approximately 50 individual Rice's whales.** The Rice's whale's very small population size and limited distribution increase its vulnerability to threats. The most significant threats they face are energy exploration and development, oil spills and spill response, vessel strikes, ocean noise, ocean debris, aquaculture, and entanglement in fishing gear. With such a small population size, the death of a single whale due to any of these stressors could have devastating consequences for the population's recovery. The new species retains its protected status under the Endangered Species Act, as it was previously listed as an endangered subspecies (Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale), and is protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

**Photo (above):** Members of the Stranding Network perform a necropsy on a large baleen whale, later determined to be an endangered Rice's whale, which stranded in the Florida Everglades National Park in January 2019. Photo: National Park Service.

**Photo (right):** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and biologists from Mote Marine Laboratory conduct an external examination of a Rice's whale in the Florida Everglades National Park. Photo: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.



<sup>3</sup> With grateful acknowledgement to Clearwater Marine Aquarium; Dolphins Plus; Everglades National Park Service; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Marine Animal Rescue Society; Mote Marine Laboratory Stranding Investigations Program; Sarasota Dolphin Research Project; and the University of Miami, Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.

<sup>4</sup> Rosel, P.E. and Wilcox, L. A. 2014. Genetic evidence reveals a unique lineage of Bryde's whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico. *Endangered Species Research*, 25(1), 19-34.

<sup>5</sup> Rosel, P.E., Wilcox, L.A., Yamada, T.K. and Mullin, K.D., 2021. A new species of baleen whale (*Balaenoptera*) from the Gulf of Mexico, with a review of its geographic distribution. *Marine Mammal Science*, 37(2), pp.577-610.



# Species in the Spotlight



## North Atlantic Right Whale<sup>6</sup> (*Eubalaena glacialis*)

North Atlantic right whales are a critically endangered species and one of NOAA Fisheries' "Species in the Spotlight." In the spring and 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. While on the calving grounds, mother-calf pairs are at a heightened risk for vessel strikes because these individuals spend nearly all their time at or close to the water surface, but are difficult to see. The population has been in decline since 2010, with fewer than 350 individuals<sup>7</sup> remaining and fewer than 100 breeding females as of 2019 (for more updated information please see Pace 2021). In 2017, NOAA Fisheries declared an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) after several deaths were documented in the United States and Canada. **In 2019, the UME was still ongoing and an additional 10 dead stranded whales and 1 seriously injured<sup>8</sup> individual were documented. At the end of 2019, 38 individual right whales (30 confirmed dead, 8 seriously injured) were included in the UME for the 3-year period 2017–2019.** The UME continued past 2019; 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/2017-2022-north-atlantic-right-whale-unusual-mortality-event>



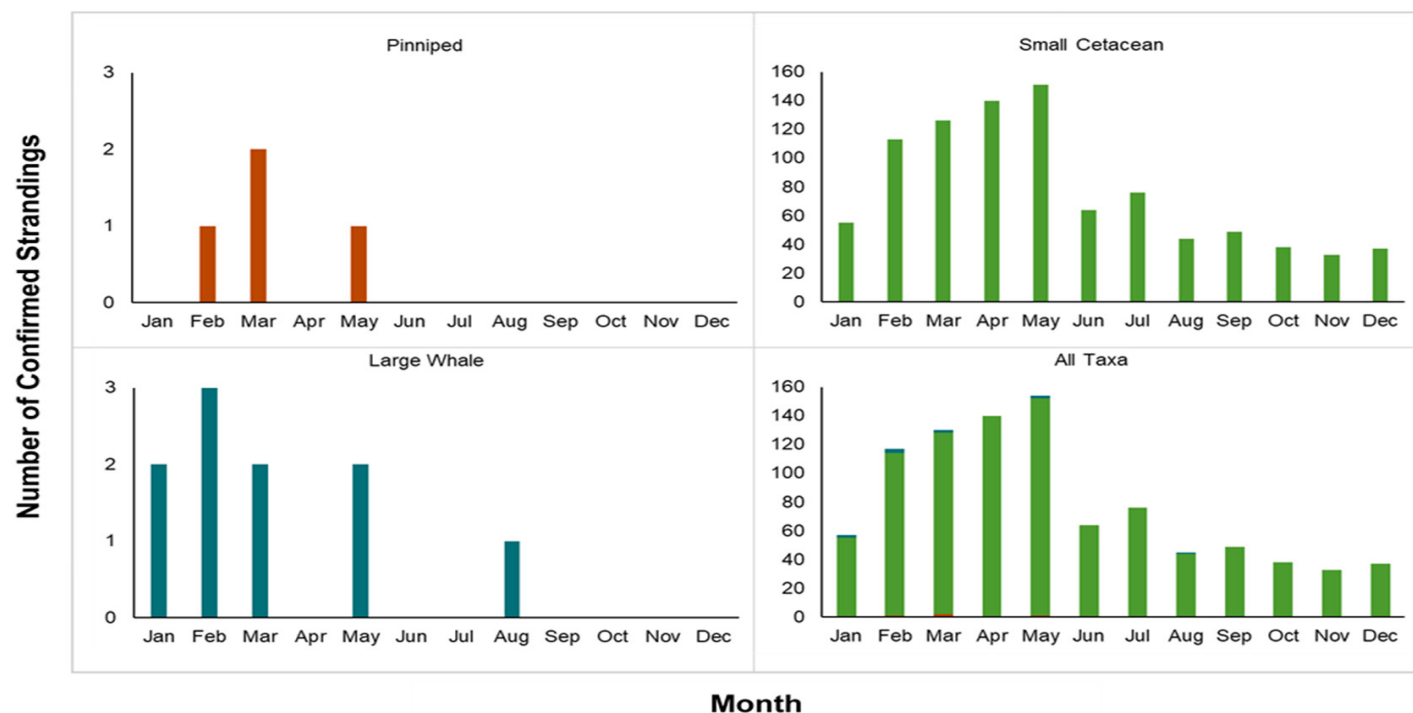
**Photo (left):** North Atlantic right whale #3370 was sighted on the calving grounds off central Florida with a new calf in February 2019. Pregnant females and mothers with nursing calves are especially at risk of vessel strikes because of how much time they spend near the water's surface. Photo: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

<sup>6</sup> Species illustrations throughout this report are not to scale relative to each other.

<sup>7</sup> For the most recent estimates, please see: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/north-atlantic-right-whale>.

<sup>8</sup> 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).

### Marine Mammal Strandings by Month in the Southeast Region, 2019



**Figure SER-4:** Seasonality of marine mammal strandings in the Southeast 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 Southeast Region Strand in 2019?

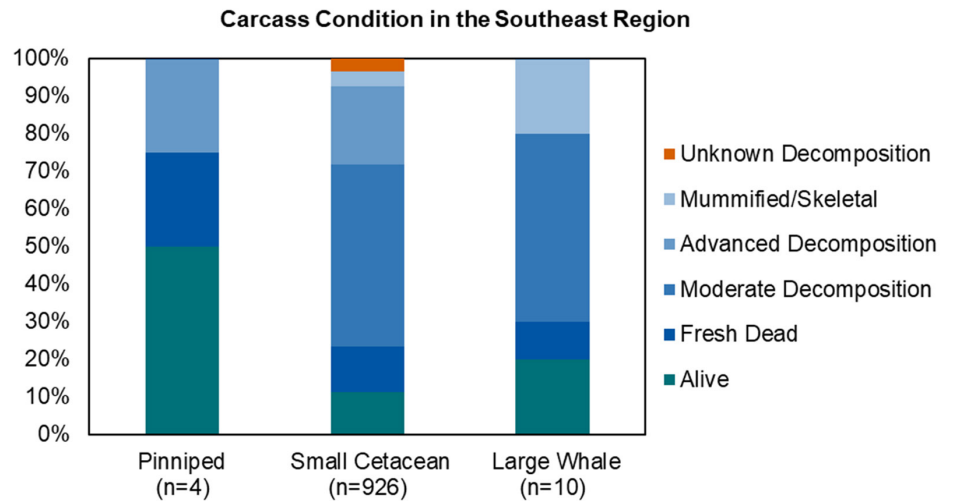
In the Southeast Region a number of year-round resident stocks of common bottlenose dolphins live nearshore in bays, sounds, and estuaries. Coastal and offshore stocks of bottlenose dolphins and other cetacean species are also routinely present all year. In 2019, stranding events occurred throughout the year (Figure SER-4), but strandings of small cetaceans were elevated in February through May, which can be attributed to the Northern Gulf of Mexico Bottlenose Dolphin Unusual Mortality Event (UME) declared in 2019. Further, the small peak in July coincides with two separate mass stranding events involving short-finned pilot whales that occurred in Florida and Georgia.



**Photo (left):** Response to a dead common bottlenose dolphin reported in Canaveral National Seashore. The dolphin was thin, and biological samples were taken to determine cause of stranding. Photo: Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute.

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

Although the majority of marine mammals that strand in the Southeast Region are found dead, a small proportion (11 percent) of animals stranded alive in 2019 (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 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 14 animals transferred to rehabilitation facilities in 2019 (pinniped=1; small cetacean=13), 21 percent (n=3) were released.



**Figure SER-5:** The condition of stranded marine mammals on initial observation in the Southeast Region, 2019.



**Photo (left):** A dead stranded adult male common bottlenose dolphin is recovered from Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, Florida. Photo: Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute.

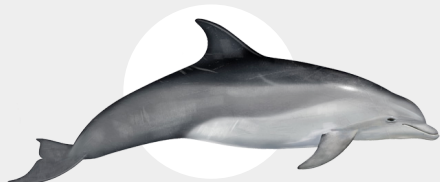


## What Types of Unusual Mortality Events Were Occurring in the Southeast Region?



One new UME was declared in the Southeast Region in 2019:

### Northern Gulf of Mexico Bottlenose Dolphin UME



**First Declared:** 2019 (timeframe for this UME is February 1, 2019, to November 30, 2019)

**Number of new cases in 2019:** 337

**Total Number of Cases (2018 -- 2019):** 183

**Primary Causes and Findings:** Ecological factors. The cause of the mortality event was determined to be environmentally driven by exposure to low salinity waters resulting from extreme freshwater discharge from watersheds that drain into the northern Gulf of Mexico

**Locations of Cases:** Northern Gulf of Mexico coastline; the largest number of cases occurred in Mississippi and eastern Louisiana

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

In 2019, there were also four ongoing UMEs in the Southeast Region:

### Atlantic Minke Whale UME



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

**Status in 2019:** Ongoing

**Number of new cases in 2019:** 22

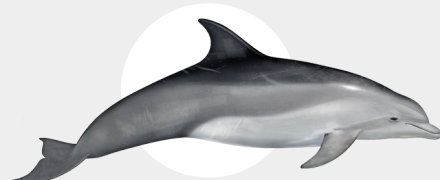
**Total number of cases (2017 – 2019):** 79

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

**Status in 2019:** Timeframe for this UME is July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019

**Number of new cases in 2019:** 49

**Total number of cases (2017 – 2019):** 183

**Primary Causes and Findings:** Biotxin 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

**North Atlantic Right Whale UME****First Declared:** 2017**Status in 2019:** Ongoing**Number of new cases in 2019:** 11 (10 dead and 1 seriously injured)**Total number of cases (2017 – 2019):** 38 (30 dead and 8 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 2019:** Ongoing**Number of new cases in 2019:** 27**Total number of cases (2016 – 2019):** 112**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 the 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>**Photo (left):** Response to a dead stranded minke whale in Cape Romain Wildlife Refuge, South Carolina. Photo: NOAA's National Ocean Service.



# What Can Members of the Public Do?



## 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**

A bottlenose dolphin live-stranded at Canaveral National Seashore, Florida in May 2019. Because of the remote location, the animal was transported to a lagoon where it was temporarily held in water until it could be transported onwards to rehabilitation facilities at SeaWorld Orlando. Photo: Hubbs SeaWorld Research Institute.



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## 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.

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

## 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 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.*