



# Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network Newsletter

November 2020

**NMFS Stranding Hotline: 1-877-925-7333**

## NMFS Stranding Program

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# Greetings from the Coordinator

By Mandy Keogh, NMFS

As we approach the end of the year and reflect back, it's safe to say that this summer was not the one we planned on. When the last Stranding Newsletter came out in April, many of us were adjusting to working from home and dealing with new (furry) co-workers. I know I've enjoyed seeing or hearing your pets during various meetings. In spite of the challenges, the Alaska Stranding Network members have been hard at work ensuring reports of stranded marine mammals are documented and when possible, collecting level A data and samples.



Loki and June, two of my furry co-workers

As of November 27<sup>th</sup>, 238 stranded marine mammals have been reported in the Alaska Region and we have two on-going Unusual Mortality Event (UME) investigations. Updates on both the ice seal and gray whale UMEs are provided in this newsletter as well as updates from several stranding network members and some interesting stranding events.

As we head into winter and the flu season it's important to reiterate the message from the MMHSRP Team about COVID-19. Our first priority is your health and we recognize that we may not be able to respond to stranded marine mammals as we normally would or even how we responded earlier this year. Please remember to always follow any local guidance including community closures, shelter in place, or other local restrictions if you consider responding to a stranding and feel free to reach out to me at any time.

Key:  : This is a symbol to help easily recognize the end of a story or section.

**Photo opp...** : These are miscellaneous and interesting stranding photos received this year, but which do not necessarily accompany a specific story or topic in this newsletter.

Hyperlinks: [NOAA Fisheries U.S. Whale Entanglement Response Level 1 - Alaska Region First Responder Training](#)



## Photo opp...

*Left:* One of the many gray whales observed on Tugidak Island during a carcass survey with the USCG in 2020. Tugidak is a long, narrow island, roughly 18 x 5 miles, to the SW of Kodiak. Many large whale carcasses have come to rest on the island over the years, and 2020 was no exception. Nine of the 45 stranded Alaskan gray whales this year were reported from Tugidak Island.

*Photo courtesy of B. Pristas.*

# AKR Large Whale Entanglement Response 2020 Update

by Sadie Wright

As of October 23, we've received nine confirmed reports of entangled large whales in Alaska in 2020: one gray whale, seven humpback whales, and one unidentified whale (likely a humpback or minke whale). Most of the reports were from Southeast Alaska (8), and one was from Kodiak. Various fishing gear was involved in all eight reports (e.g., gill net, shrimp pot line, salmon trolling gear, longline gear). No dead entangled large whales have been reported this year.



*Above:* Humpback whale with salmon gillnet entanglement near Point Retreat, Southeast Alaska, August 18, 2020. Photo courtesy of S. Teerlink (NMFS; MMHSRP permit 18786-04).

On-water response included searches, entanglement assessment, and photo documentation by trained Large Whale Entanglement Response (LWER) Program responders and partners. Although we couldn't meet in person for hands-on training this year, Ed Lyman provided several virtual refresher and advanced LWER trainings via Google Hangouts. Thank you to Ed and everyone who participated virtually to stay connected and up to speed on current technologies and best practices for entanglement assessment and authorized response.

If you're interested and haven't taken it yet, please consider taking our US Whale Entanglement Response Level 1 First Responder Training specific to Alaska. This online training provides foundational information in assessment and communication to ensure the best possible outcome for entangled whales in Alaska. [Level 1 First Responder online Training: Alaska](#)

# Large Whale Entanglement Response - continued

Public reports from fishermen and other boaters are the number one way we learn about entangled whales in Alaska. Please let your friends and family know about the Level 1 online training and provide them with the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline number to report entangled whales (1-877-925-7773).

See the [2018 National Report](#) on Large Whale Entanglements to learn how the Alaska 2020 numbers (so far) compare to past years and other regions.



## Teamwork Saves the Day

We have received some unusual reports over the years and this one definitely fits into that category. On the morning of May 7, a call came in concerning a sub-adult harbor seal with its lower jaw/canine teeth stuck in a ~1 ½” metal slat opening of a walkway grate of the Valdez hatchery. Sure enough, subsequent photos confirmed the seal’s predicament.

A successful outcome was only possible through smooth and efficient collaboration between experts and volunteers from NMFS, ASLC, International Wildlife Rescue (IWR), the Solomon Gulch Hatchery, and the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. With NMFS, ASLC and IWR veterinary gear and advice in hand, IWR volunteers were able to sedate, “unhook”, examine, and release the seal. Aside from some swelling and slight bleeding of the jaw, the seal appeared to be in good shape and, after recovering from sedation, swam off without difficulty. The rescue was even more memorable given considerations around COVID-19.



The hapless harbor seal caught in the slats of a 2000 lb. walkway grate.

*Photo courtesy of R. Unger.*



The seal, now freed, recovers from sedation.

*Photo courtesy of L. Altieri.*



The seal heads off after release, fortunately with only a tender jaw to show for the mishap.

*Photo courtesy of L. Altieri.*



# Ice Seal Unusual Mortality Event Update

By Barb Mahoney and Gay Sheffield

On 12 September 2019, NMFS declared an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) due to elevated strandings of ice seals (bearded, ringed, and spotted seals) in the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas in Alaska, effective 1 June 2018.

Table 1. The ice seal Unusual Mortality Event reported strandings

Year	Bearded	Ringed	Spotted	Unid	Total
2010-2017 Average number of reported strandings					29
2018 <sup>^</sup>	35	29	20	28	112
2019	49	36	23	57	165
2020 <sup>*</sup>	10	9	6	9	34
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>311</b>
<sup>^</sup> 1 June- 31 December 2018					
<sup>*</sup> 1 January - 10 November 2020					

Between 2010-2017, the yearly average of reported stranded ice seals was 29 compared to 122 in 2018, 165 in 2019, and 34 in 2020.

We would like to thank the many dedicated volunteers that have contributed their time to document these stranding events. The ice seal stranding reports were provided by Stranding Agreement volunteers in Nome and Utqiagvik (Dr. Raphaela Stimmelmayer), as well as many first time volunteers from Elim, Gambell, Golovin, Kivalina, Kotlik, Kotzebue (National Park Service), Point Hope, Shaktoolik, Shishmaref, and Stebbins.

All age classes of the coastal ice seals stranded, although most seals were young of the year. Few fresh seals were found and only a small number of samples were collected for genetics, harmful algal blooms, and histology. We still do not know why ice seals are stranding, although poor body condition was a commonality among many carcasses.

This unusual ice seal die-off remains particularly alarming for coastal communities throughout the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas because ice seals remain an essential nutritional, cultural, and economic resource.

As of November 10<sup>th</sup>, we are encouraged that the reported stranding rate of ice seals during 2020 has declined to a more 'typical' number for stranded ice seals (Table 1). Though pandemic concerns have limited some information flow, the number of strandings reported to date includes dedicated beach surveys by local community members that occurred in Kotlik, Kotzebue, Nome, and Stebbins.

# Comparative Anatomy: Bone ID 101

by Kate Savage

Our stranding team receives frequent requests for bone identification. Finding an answer generally requires first knowing which bone you are looking at, and then trying to figure out the species from whence it came. Recognizing the bone is generally a slam dunk - after all, it's not tough distinguishing a rib from a vertebra (although even that can be tricky, see Spring 2020 newsletter). The process of assigning a species to a bone, however, can be very challenging. Fortunately, we have excellent expertise and resources available, and the newsletter is the perfect avenue to both offer recognition and appreciation for the assistance we have received over the years and to pass on some of that knowledge.

The first shout-out goes to Aren Gunderson and Link Olson, staff of the Museum of the North (UAF), who frequently and consistently provide their time and professional opinion in bone identification. They have been wonderfully receptive to our questions! Recently, I sent Aren some photos of a set of 3 x 3", very geometric, very light, "shapes", found near the skeleton of a gray whale (spoiler alert: as you might expect, the location of bones can provide vital context clues). If it weren't for their near perfect symmetry, they would look like worm tracks in coral or clay. Aren's answer was prompt: they were the



*Carpel bones from a gray whale.*

*Photo courtesy of M. Doran.*

gray whale carpels, "hand" bones fully embedded in the cartilage between the radius/ulna and the phalanges (finger bones). He also sent the link to [virtual museum](#).

I highly recommend you take a look! It's a virtual museum with an osteology section that includes many marine mammal species and very handy for bone ID. I also asked Aren if there were any



*Photo courtesy of UAF Museum of the North.*

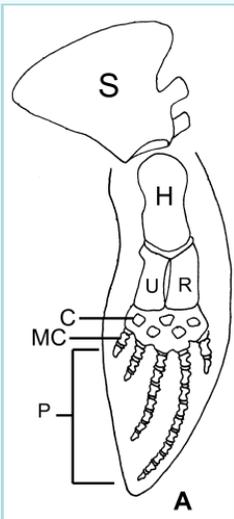
bones that he could think of that were almost definitive for the species. He described the extremely tall spinous process of beaked whale vertebrae, with height nearly 2 times the width of the transverse processes. Check out the photos of a *Mesoplodon* vertebrae – really cool!

*Left: Unusually tall spinous process of a mesoplodon sp. vertebra. More specific ID would be size and location.*

# Bone ID 101 - continued

For bone ID and other questions, we also look to those with knowledge in particular species. One of my go-to pros who has been extremely helpful with gray, beaked, and unidentified whale questions as well as bone ID is Dr. Robert Brownell, Senior Scientist at SWFSC. His recommendation for identifying cetacean skeletal remains, at least for mysticetes, is to photograph the scapulae or shoulder blade (odontocete ID is more of a no brainer for most of us, pun intended). Fortunately, whales have two scapulae which helps with access, even if you have to dig a little. Scapular features, such as the acromion and corocoid processes, can be very distinct and helpful in identification (see below). He also recommends adding something for scale when photographing scapulae (or any bones for that matter).

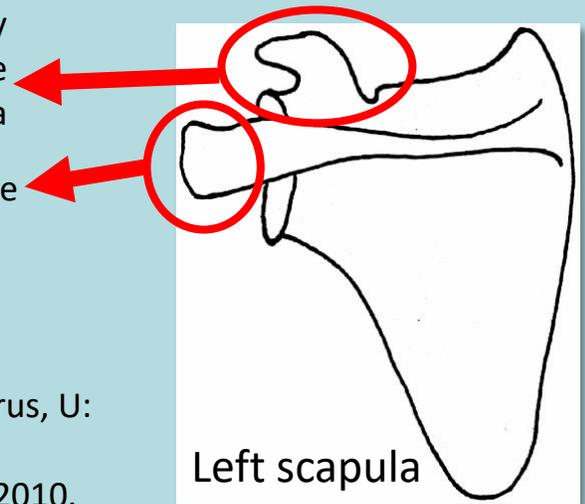
Thanks to all that have helped us in bone identification. It's helpful information to pass along!



The **coracoid** process is the beak shaped bony prominence on the anterior surface of the scapula

The **acromion** is the flat, lateral aspect of the scapular spine

Left, A generalized flipper. S: scapula, H: humerus, U: ulna, R: radius, C: carpals, MC: metacarpals, P: phalanges. Modified from Sanchez and Berta, 2010.



Left scapula

Compare the two scapulae below: humpback whale (left) to the bowhead whale (right). Humpback whale scapulae are diagnostic in lacking an acromion and having only a vestigial coracoid process. These features are large and well developed in all other cetaceans (Clapham and Mead 1999).

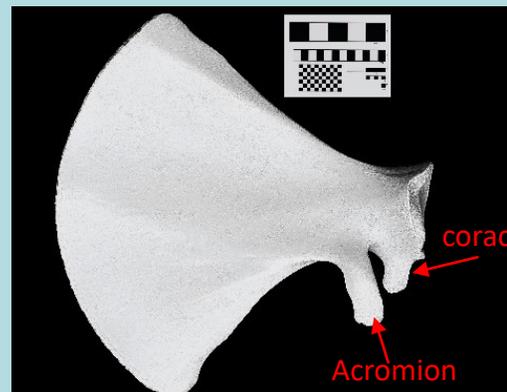


coracoid

Right scapula of a humpback whale

Photo courtesy of NPS.

Clapham, P.J. and J.G. Mead. 1999 *Megaptera novaeangliae*. Mammalian Species 604: 1-9.



coracoid

Acromion

Right scapula of a bowhead whale

Photo courtesy of Museum of the North.



# Secrets at the top of the world: Uncovering the mysteries of the Bering Sea “Agvisuaq” Harbor Porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena vomerina*)

by Raphaela Stimmelmayer

For someone who mostly works with bowhead, beluga, and the occasional gray whale, getting to work on a small cetacean like the harbor porpoise is exciting. In late July 2013, tossed high up on the surf along the sandy gravelly beach around Monument, I came across my first harbor porpoise. This unusual stranding fare was a small, darkly colored and delicate neonate with a fractured skull, both eyes missing, tufted skin from many seagull pecks, and an open umbilicus (Fig. 1). Much of the viscera was gone, but I collected what tissues were left for life history and histology. A single case is rarely enough to tell the whole story, so over time, the neonate harbor porpoise stranding faded in my memory. Fast forward to the first of August 2020, when along the same stretch of beach during our weekly stranding surveys down south, another little neonate showed up (Fig. 1). Its story was similar: dark tufted skin, open umbilicus, fractured skull, missing eyes, but this time most of its organs were intact and pristine. Histopathological findings of abundant pulmonary squames in not fully aerated lungs confirmed that its death had occurred soon after birth. No signs of infectious disease were present. Remembering my first neonate from 2013, as well as a reported sighting of a dead suspect neonate calf (no measurements taken and not further examined) in Wainwright 2016, I wondered whether the northern Chukchi Sea, and in particular the Monument area around Utqiagvik, was a calving area for Bering Sea stock harbor porpoises. Only a few papers talk about the tiny porpoise and its northern excursions. Most observations have been documented by local hunters/fishermen and community members, with reports dating back to the early 1950s. Adult harbor porpoises sightings, bycatch and subsistence hunting had been reported as far as the Mackenzie River Delta, Inuvialuit Settlement Region (formerly North West territories), Canada. Around Utqiagvik, most of the sightings and bycatch of adults were from the Elsoon Lagoon, an important local subsistence fishing area. Among all the bycatch reported, only one report is of an adult female and a neonate calf during the month of August of 1952.



Fig. 1. Blunt trauma to the head in 2 neonate harbor porpoises, Utqiagvik.

# Secrets at the top of the world – continued.

Are these few confirmed summer strandings of newborn calves spanning nearly 70 years enough evidence to propose the existence of calving areas at the Top of the World? Our challenging arctic survey conditions include high scavenging pressure, remoteness, variable accessibility, and low human density. Taking all that into account, along with the size of newborn calves, I do like to think so. Calving along our northern shores may be one of the best kept secrets of this shy and enigmatic visitor.

Table 1. Level A data of 2 stranded neonate harbor porpoise in the Monument area of Utqiagvik, Alaska.

ID	2020 HP 0801 FD	2013 HP FD1
DATE	08/01/2020	07/29/2013
Age, Sex, Total Body Length, Weight	Neonate, male, 87 cm, 7.15 kg	Neonate, male, 89 cm, 8.5 kg
Cause of Death (COD)	Blunt trauma (skull fracture; dislocated fracture mandible)	Blunt trauma (skull fracture; dislocated fracture mandible)
Body Condition (sternal blubber depth)	Fair (0.7-1.3 cm)	Good (1.5-2.0 cm)
Carcass Code	2	2
Long, Lat	71.185833N, 157.010278W	71. 011277N, 157. 000410W

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to the hunters and community members of the North Slope, Alaska, who share their observations with the North Slope Department of Wildlife Management so that we all can better understand the ocean and the animals that live in it. A special thank you to all the survey team members that have made the survey happen come rain or shine over the years, in particular, Dave Ramey, Rita Acker, Frances Olemaun, Olive Kanayurak, and Robert Sarren. Under authorization of the AK Stranding Network, the 2020 neonate porpoise carcass has been transferred to the University of Alaska Museum of the North for skeleton preparation and preservation. Skin samples of stranded harbor porpoises (2013; 2020) and from bycaught adults (2020) have been provided to the SWFSC for genetic stock structure analysis.



## Photo opp...

Kudos to Rachel Alinsunurin and Everett Patton of Dutch Harbor for phoning in a Nov. 7 report of this northern sea otter (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*) with a ball of monofilament on its chest. Fortunately, the sea otter was free of monofilament about an hour after it was first seen. Rachel heard mention of sea otters playing with fishing line, which may have been the case with this animal – a dangerous toy!

Photo courtesy of E. Patton.

# Notes from the North

by Gay Sheffield, Raphaela Stimmelmayer and Kate Savage

- Bravo! While funding for ASAMM Project was cut in 2020, the team was able to continue bowhead surveys in the Beaufort in a very successful collaboration with the North Slope Borough. See their findings and more information at: [ASAMM Project](#)

- Coastal communities throughout the Bering Strait region experienced an unprecedented foreign marine debris event that began in late July. This event continues to be tracked in a collaborative response by regional organizations, residents, the NOAA Marine Debris Program, and D-17 USCG. There is much regional concern as to what has happened to cause this, who is responsible, and how to make it stop.

Photo courtesy of G. Sheffield.

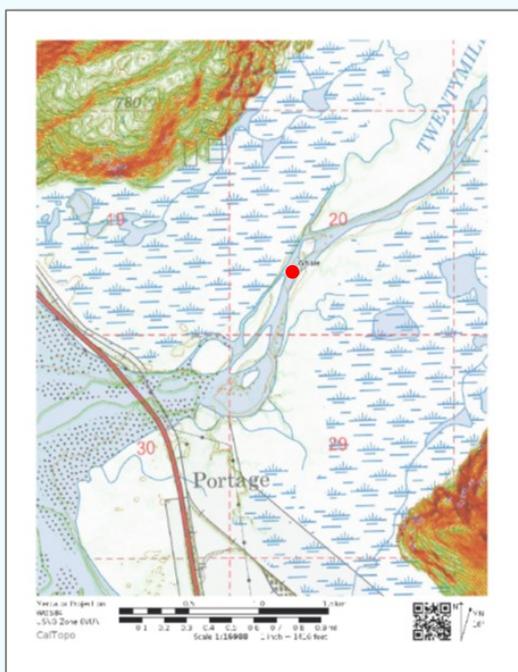


- The first book dedicated to the bowhead whale in nearly three decades is now available: [Bowhead Whale Biology and Human Interactions Book](#)
- The Alaska Ocean Observing System (AOOS) has partnered with the UAF International Arctic Research Center, to produce the Fall 2020 Bering Region ocean update/newsletter. This issue provides excellent comprehensive information on the most recent physical and biological conditions in the area and may be found here: [AOOS Fall 2020 Bering Region](#)
- Yet another result of declining sea ice may be increased killer whale predation on bowhead whales: [Killer whale Predation](#)
- During June 2020 there was the biogenic oil-fouling event near Savoonga that caused the death of several seabirds, including eider, puffin, and shearwaters. Carcasses were collected and necropsied by the USGS-NWHC. Cause of death was considered inhalation of the material and concurrent loss of thermal insulation due to an emaciated physical condition. The investigation into the substance is ongoing.

# Twentymile River Gray Whale

by Kate Savage

Gray whale strandings in Cook Inlet are not rare. Between 2000 and 2020, 12 stranded gray whales were reported in Cook Inlet, with annual peaks of two to four strandings during the UME years. It's also not unusual for challenging events to occur in Cook Inlet. The geographic emphasis of those events is generally Turnagain Arm, an area of mud flats in NE Cook Inlet with magnitude of tides only second in North America to the Bay of Fundy. Turnagain Arm tides can be up to 40 feet, which means a huge volume of water moving very fast so, not surprisingly, it's also an area where live strandings have occurred. Examples include a fin whale in 2016, a humpback whale in 2019 (see Fall 2019 newsletter), and many Cook Inlet belugas over the years.



Despite this history, it was still an unexpected surprise on May 25 when we heard of a live gray whale 1.5 miles up from the mouth of the Twentymile River at the far eastern end of Turnagain Arm. Barb Mahoney worked quickly in contacting the Girdwood Fire Department who generously sent an inflatable up river to investigate.

*Left:* A map of the braided Twentymile River, with two bridges, shallows, and the gray whale (red dot).



*Right:* The gray whale upriver on May 25.

*Photo courtesy of C. Carson.*

The whale was reported swimming in a 200 yard loop, presumably stuck due to shallows and low tide. We waited to see if the whale would depart with the high tide. Unfortunately, it stayed.

Number of Gray Whale Strandings	Jan 1, 2019    Nov 10, 2020	
	2019	2020
Canada	10	5
US Total	122	77
Alaska	48	45
Washington	34	12
Oregon	6	3
California	34	18
Mexico	81	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>169</b>

## Gray Whale UME 2020

The Gray Whale UME, declared in 2019 and extending from Mexico to Alaska has continued. In 2020, fewer strandings were reported along the west coast of the US and Canada while Mexico had a slight increase in strandings. In Alaska, gray whale strandings decreased from 48 to 45 (as of Nov. 20).

Further information on UME data can be accessed here: [2019-2020 Gray Whale UME](#)

Further information on Mexican gray whales can be accessed here: [Mexican gray whales](#)

# Twentymile River Gray Whale - continued

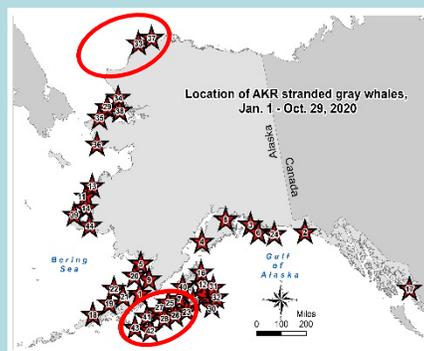
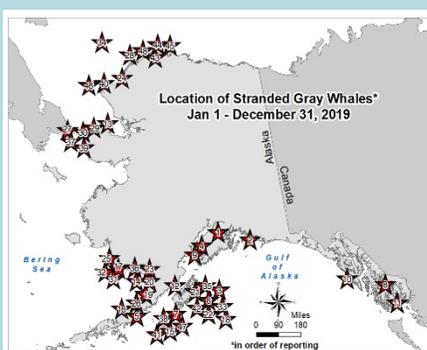
Once it became apparent that the whale was not moving downstream with the high tide, we started devising a strategy, keeping in mind COVID-19 precautions.

Considerations included:

- **Assessment and sampling** – Collecting information about the whale, including behavior, age class, and body condition required a boat operator familiar with the river. We also discussed noninvasive sampling.
- **Herding/hazing** – We discussed the possibility of trying to move the whale downstream with biologists experienced in gray whale behavior. All recommended against hazing/herding and we decided we would not attempt to move the whale. However, we worked with an acoustician to have acoustic playback protocols on hand, one land-based and one boat-based, and only to elicit attraction behavior, in case we might need it in the future.
- **Environment** – We collected information on upcoming tides and tidal influence upriver, characteristics of the river including physical parameters such as salinity, as well as biological ones. A eulachon run was in progress and the hope was that the whale had followed the eulachon to forage upriver. For this we collected information on historical runs, including peaks, duration and extent of eulachon presence upriver.
- **Euthanasia** – We discussed the repercussions should the whale live strand. For a number of reasons, we decided palliative care was the best option.
- **Necropsy** – A necropsy team was standing by in the event that the whale died.
- **Subsistence** – We had a plan in place for subsistence requests in the event the whale died.
- **Crowd control and media** – Cook Inlet is the most populated watershed in Alaska and there was a great deal of public interest in the whale.

## Gray Whale UME 2020 - continued

There were several extenuating circumstances that may have influenced the number of regional gray whale reports in 2020. The first involves the loss of the ASAMM Project surveys of the Chukchi in 2020. In 2019, the team contributed eight of the 48 gray whale stranding reports as well as observations of live whales. The second was an increase in Kodiak carcass surveys from two in 2019 to six in 2020. These surveys were only possible with the help of NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) personnel, Sun'aq Tribe stranding network members, and the US Coast Guard who flew the team.



***Thank you to NOAA OLE and the Sun'aq Tribe in Kodiak!***

*Gray whale reports in 2019 (left) and 2020 (right) with the red ovals denoting the survey changes described above.*

# Twentymile River Gray Whale - continued

On June 2, a team was sent up river to collect information, including behavioral changes with the approach/presence of the boat. A drone was used to photograph the whale and surroundings, and also to collect respiratory samples from the blow.



*Left and above:* The drone operator on shore collects footage.

Photos courtesy of R. Marlow.

On the morning of June 3, the whale moved down river, stopping directly below the bridge and getting stranded as the tide receded. It was evident the subadult whale was in poor body condition.

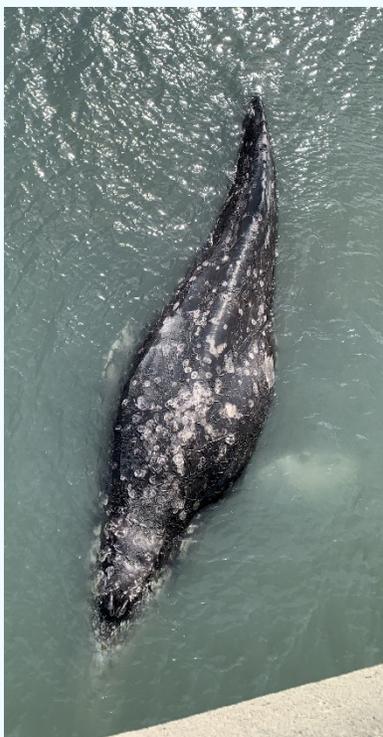
*Below:* The whale strands below the bridge pilings, frees itself as the tide rises, and then departs the river.



*Above:* Natalie Rouse (AVPS) attaches the sample dish to the drone.

Photo courtesy of R. Marlow.

Photos  
courtesy  
of B.  
Mahoney.



By 6:30 pm, the whale freed itself and left the river. At about midnight a very dark and grainy photo was taken of the whale stranded at Ingram Creek, which was gone by the next morning. On June 5, an aerial survey in the area was unsuccessful in locating the whale.

# Twentymile River Gray Whale - continued

On June 12, a commercial pilot flying near the mouth of the Theodore River on the west side of Cook Inlet reported a dead whale. The observation was confirmed during a dedicated flight on June 13 and the carcass was thought to be the Twentymile River whale. The site was considered too dangerous to allow access to the carcass.

When asked about hazing the whale, John Calambokidis replied that it was either in the river because it wanted to be there or because it was compromised in some way. With the poor body condition and lack of evidence that it was foraging, we suspected the latter. While we learned a lot throughout the event, and will be better equipped should a similar situation arise in the future, we were still very saddened by the death of the animal as well as the conditions that prevented us from trying to figure out why it died.



Photo courtesy of Kenai Flight Service



Photo courtesy of N. Rouse, AVPS



## Gray Whale UME 2020 - continued

At the onset of 2020, we were determined to collect all the necessary gray whale samples to help determine the cause of the UME. Like so many plans this year, our expectations fell to the wayside. The preliminary cause of the UME is still undetermined. Throughout the US, Mexico, and Canada responses were hampered due to COVID-19 precautions. The presence of whales in poor body condition, live and dead, in all locations continued into 2020. In Alaska, both the geographic isolation of carcasses and decreased response capability precluded any necropsies. In the upcoming year, we will again strive to collect all the gray whale samples possible to help determine the cause of the UME, while maintaining safety as our first priority.

Level of Response		
	2019	2020
Report only	35	34
Sample only	9	11
Necropsy	4	0
	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>

Condition Code		
	2019	2020
Alive (1)	0	1
Fresh dead (2)	13	3
Moderate decomp (3)	12	14
Advanced decomp (4)	20	23
Mummified/skeletal (5)	1	1
Condition unknown (6)	2	3
	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>

Age Class		
	2019	2020
Calf	5	2
Yearling	3	4
Subadult	8	4
Adult	10	13
Unknown	22	22
	<b>48</b>	<b>45</b>

# News from the Alaska SeaLife Center

by Halley Werner and Savannah Costner

I think we can all agree that the 2020 stranding season was one for the books. ASLC's experience was no exception. While the admits for rehabilitation weren't above average, the challenges encountered most certainly were. Between an animal embargo on many Alaskan flights, COVID safety policies restricting staff and volunteer involvement, financial struggles, and the inability to open our doors to the seasonal staff and interns we have come to rely on, there were many hurdles along the way. If nothing else, this year has been a good reminder of how passionate, dedicated, and resilient our year-round staff are!

ASLC's first patient of the year was a ringed seal pup, arriving in March. He was found frozen to the snow on a snowmachine trail in Kotzebue at just 4 days old. Unfortunately, this pup was only with us for a day before succumbing to the effects of trauma, frostbite, and likely sepsis.



Our most common seal patient, harbor seals, did not disappoint. Our Wildlife Response Team responded to eight harbor seals, with three coming from Southeast and five from Cook Inlet. Interestingly, all of the Cook Inlet pups came to us within a 10 day period. The dependent seals had an array of ailments, including dehydration, umbilical infections, and emaciation.

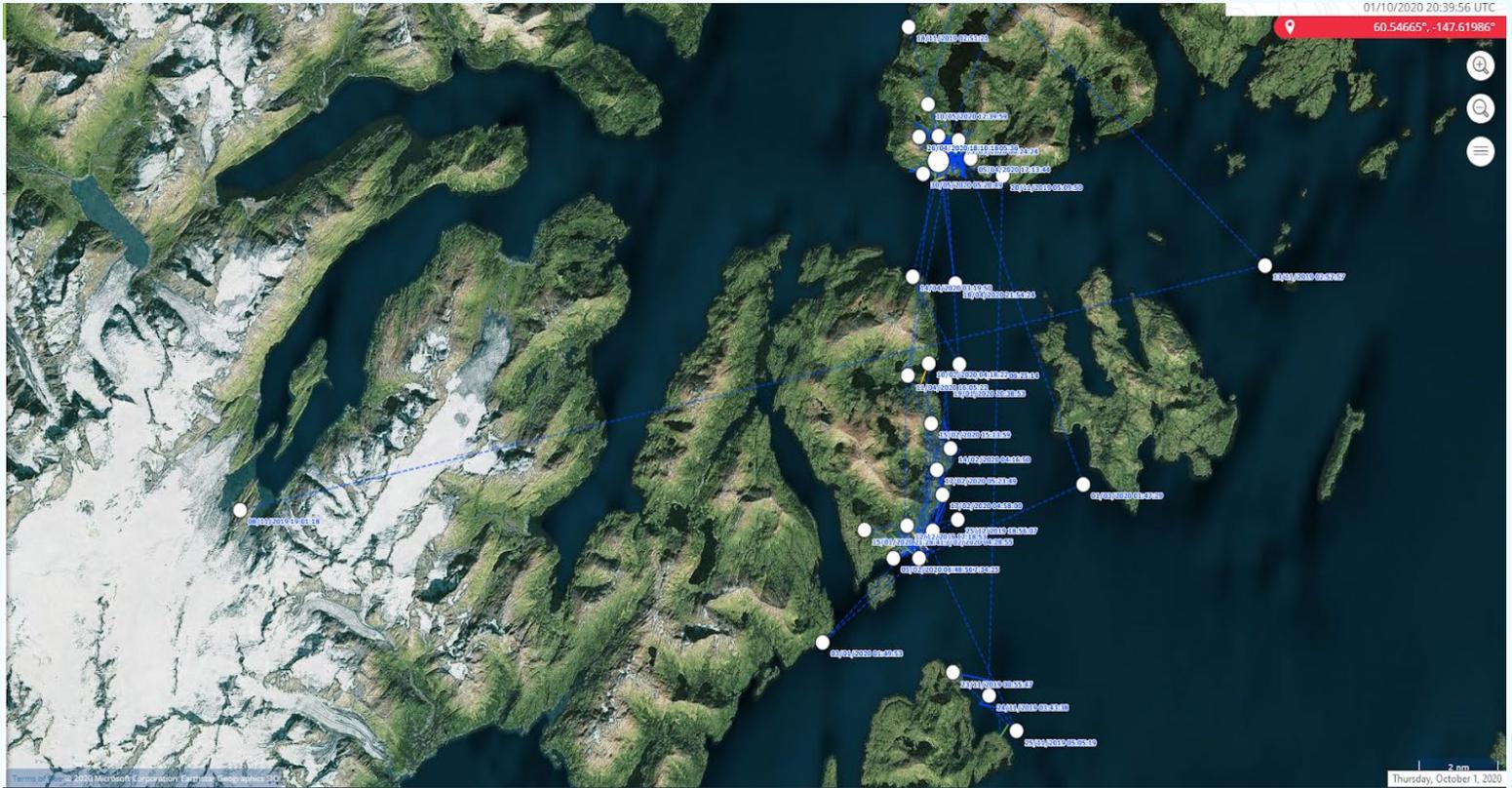
Despite the challenges of 2020, we were thrilled to release six thriving harbor seal pups in August. The one surviving Southeast pup flew back to Juneau for release. A week later, the five Cook Inlet seals were released in Kenai - a historic event for ASLC, as we've never had the opportunity for such a large release!



# News from the Alaska SeaLife Center - continued



Last, but most certainly not least, ASLC's Wildlife Response Team would like to extend a massive THANK YOU to Kate Savage, Sadie Wright, Mandy Keogh, Justin Jenniges, Lauri Jemison, and Barb Mahoney. You really have gone above and beyond by housing and treating seals before and after their flights, transporting them to and from the airport, and even applying a satellite tag so we could track the seal pup that YOU released in Juneau because we could not be there. We would not have had such a successful year without your help. We are proud to be able to work beside you all!



Update from “Kenai” PV1908 who was in the Spring 2020 issue. She was admitted July 6, 2019. After intensive rehabilitation, she was released on November 7th outside of Whittier with a satellite tag to track her movements. Her tag transmitted her movements 6 months after release!

# Announcements, Updates and FYIs

Hot off the press!

## NEW AVPS WEBSITE!



In the last issue of our Stranding Newsletter, Dave Gann, the parts guy provided a helpful summary about the differences between a permit and an authorization for marine mammal parts. Have you wondered what happens to the parts and samples you may collect while responding to a stranding? Like many things, the answer is it depends. The most common sample we collect is skin, which are transferred to the Southwest Fisheries Science Center. These samples are used to determine sex or species if it was not known at the time of collection. Beyond that, these samples can be used to study marine mammal populations and identify population stocks. Other samples are transferred to researchers who have a regional Authorization letter allowing them to receive samples collected from dead or live stranded animals.

The Alaska Stranding Network is fortunate to have a pathologist as one of our members. Dr. Kathy Burek Huntington and the Alaska Veterinary Pathology Services (AVPS) are able to conduct a number of services including necropsies when the carcass is on a local beach or it can be transported to Anchorage. Dr. Burek and Natalie Rouse also receive tissues and samples collected by stranding members around Alaska and will process and transfer samples for diagnostics and disease screening. When a carcass and/or collected samples are shipped to AVPS all samples will be transferred to AVPS under their authority under the MMHSRP permit ([AVPS letter](#)). AVPS will track all samples, their disposition and complete the required reporting. AVPS may also transfer samples to researchers or museums authorized to receive samples from stranded marine mammals in support of research or archival.

Even more exciting is AVPS has a new website <https://veterinarypathologyservicesalaska.com/>, which has sample submission instructions and forms, necropsy and sampling protocols, checklists, and data forms. This website is hot off the presses and they are adding new features weekly (like training modules and references of interest). Check it out and let them know if there is anything else you would like to see on the website.

## SAVE THE DATE!!

The 2021 AK Stranding Meeting will be held in the comfort of your own space on  
March 10 and 11, from 1 – 4 pm.

If you are interested in participating, please add your name [here](#) or email  
[mandy.Keogh@noaa.gov](mailto:mandy.Keogh@noaa.gov)

# Announcements, Updates and FYIs - continued

EXTRA! EXTRA!



READ ALL ABOUT IT!

## NEW WILDLIFE PROTECTION GUIDELINES!

Exciting News! The USCG and EPA have completed their overhaul of the Alaska statewide oil spill response plans with a new Regional Contingency Plan (RCP) and four Area Contingency Plans (ACPs) for Alaska, which have replaced the previous “Unified Plan” and 10 “Subarea Plans.”

### WILDLIFE PROTECTION GUIDELINES FOR OIL SPILL RESPONSE IN ALASKA



Alaska Regional Response Team  
Wildlife Protection Committee  
Version 2020.1  
August 31, 2020

As part of the new plans, wildlife trustee agencies (NMFS, USFWS, and ADFG) worked with a multi-agency, multi-stakeholder group (the Wildlife Protection Committee) to develop new Wildlife Protection Guidelines, which are incorporated by reference into the RCP and ACPs.

The Wildlife Protection Guidelines are designed to be used by responders during a disaster that may impact wildlife in Alaska. Please access the WPG at this [ADEC website](#) to review and familiarize yourself with the new Guidelines (scroll down to “Agency Response Guides” and select the second item in the “Statewide Agency Guidance and Policy” section).

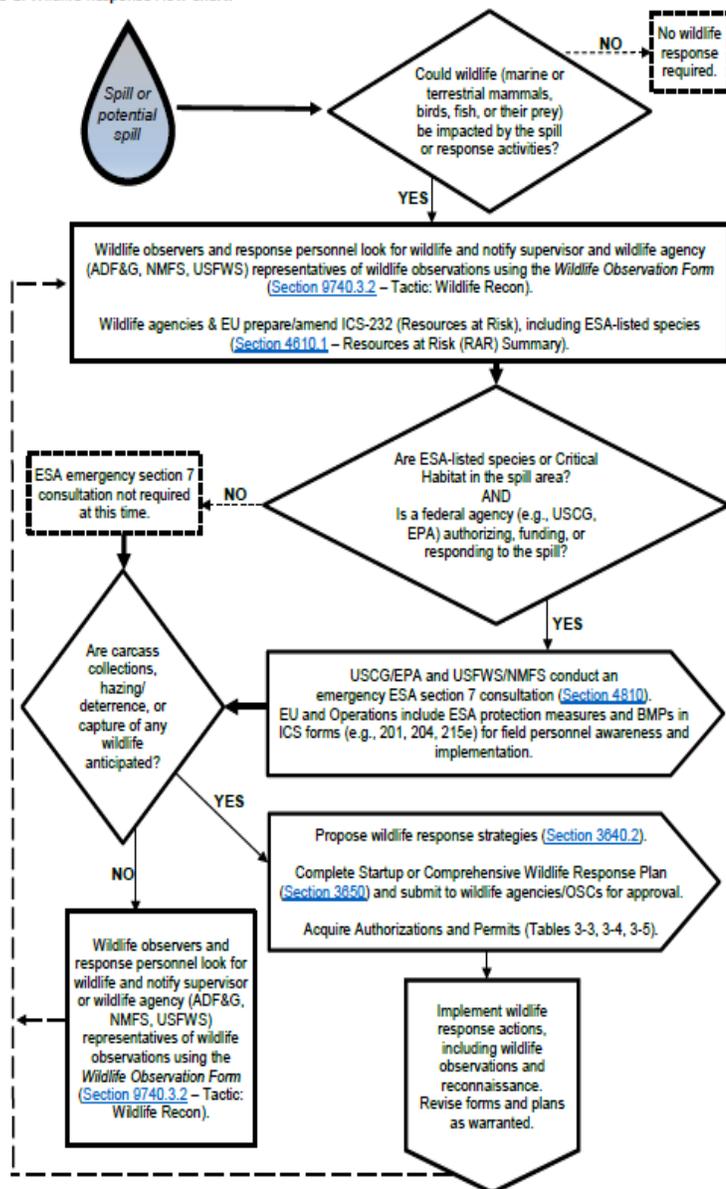
Major changes to be aware of in the new WPG:

- Completely reformatted to mirror the Table of Contents in the ACPs. The format is based on Incident Command System sections (e.g., Command, Operations, Planning).
- Operations and Planning sections contain what may appear to be redundant information about primary (carcass collection), secondary (deterrence and pre-emptive capture), and tertiary (capture and rehabilitation) wildlife response strategies. It is important for each section to be provided with information needed to carry out their duties.
- Wildlife Response Plans. These new templates are exceptionally pertinent to the Stranding Network. The Startup and Comprehensive Wildlife Response Plans are intended for use by the Responsible Party in collaboration with Wildlife Response Organizations to plan for wildlife response while providing the details needed to authorize the tactics. **Please familiarize yourselves with Section 3650.**
- A lot of information is presented in Tables and Flow Charts in an effort to be more user-friendly and understandable.
- We added a Wildlife Reconnaissance (Recon) section (3640.1) that emphasizes the importance of wildlife observations from start to finish of a spill response, and included a “Wildlife Recon Tactic” and “Wildlife Observation Form” to aid in data collection and reporting.

# Announcements, Updates and FYIs - continued

The NMFS Arctic and Cook Inlet & Kodiak Marine Mammal Disaster Response Guidelines are incorporated into the WPG by reference. Those two regional guidelines are available at NOAA websites: [Arctic](#) and [Cook Inlet & Kodiak Marine Mammal Disaster Response Guidelines](#)

Figure 3-1: Wildlife Response Flow Chart.



Wildlife Protection Guidelines  
3000 - Operations

3-4

Version 2020.1, August 2020

This flowchart in the WPG is designed to guide responders to determine when wildlife response is needed and to the planning tools needs to develop an authorized response plan.

If you have questions about the new Wildlife Protection Guidelines, or are interested in participating in an oil spill drill/exercise to practice using the WPG, please contact Sadie or one of the other NMFS Stranding Program contacts.

Once again THANK YOU for all your hard work during the stranding season. Many calls and reports came in to NMFS from all over the state, demonstrating a true team effort to respond to stranded animals in Alaska. Thank you for your help! A reminder to please submit any level A and HI forms, photos, and necropsy reports within 30 days to: [Kate.Savage@noaa.gov](mailto:Kate.Savage@noaa.gov)  
Your reports allow us to track marine mammal health in Alaska and beyond.