National Marine Fisheries Service

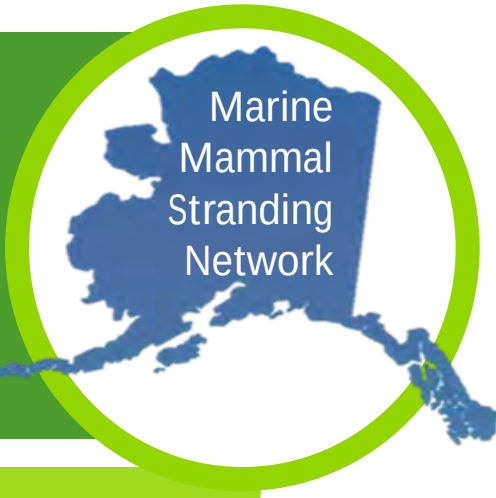
Alaska Region

Spring 2023 Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Newsletter

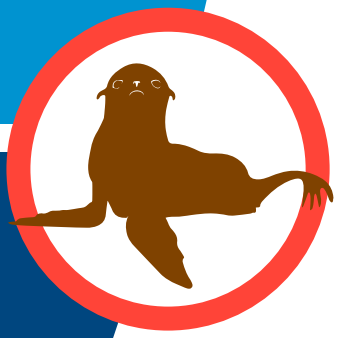
NOAA-SA-AKR-2022-05

24-hour stranding hotline:
1-877-925-7773

Spring 2023 Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Newsletter



Page



The current Examiner Guide, Level A, and Human Interaction forms can be found here

NOAA FISHERIES

Alaska Region

Greetings from the Stranding Coordinator

By:
Mandy Keogh

As of May 22, 2023, we have received 33 confirmed reports of stranded marine mammals in Alaska. The gray whale Unusual Mortality Event (UME) is ongoing and as of May 16th there have been 17 confirmed reports of dead gray whales including in California (n=9), Oregon (n=4), and Washington (n=4). We have not received any reports of stranded gray whales in Alaska yet, but live gray whales were seen near Sitka and Kodiak. Since 2019, the first report of stranded gray whales in Alaska were received between April 21st and May 15th. The 2019 Ice Seal UME is currently non-active with its closure pending. A huge thank you to Gay Sheffield and Barbara Mahoney for their work on the ice seal UME closure package and all their efforts throughout the Ice Seal UME. As we move into spring and summer, we expect to receive more reports of stranded, entangled, or distressed marine mammals throughout Alaska.

We held our annual Alaska Stranding Network Meeting on January 23, 2023 as an in person and virtual meeting. It was so great to see everyone in person and virtually. We had 11 presentations providing overviews of stranding and entanglement responses throughout Alaska, as well as an update on the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program by Sarah Wilkin (National Stranding and Emergency Response Coordinator).

Learn more about Unusual Mortality Events here

We held virtual meetings on April 10th & 11th with Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network members. We provided an overview of the Alaska Region Stranding Handbook and updates on the gray whale and ice seal UMEs. We reviewed the current research sample requests and protocols and provided updates on sampling and sthe creening plan for avian influenza in stranded marine mammals for 2023. We also provided a brief overview of the Marine Mammal Research and Response Act (MMRRA) which is Title CIV in the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act and we introduced the Health Map, as mandated by the MMRRA.

Please feel free to reach out to me (mandy.Keogh@noaa.gov) for more information on these meetings, sampling protocols or supplies, requested research samples, the MMRRA, or any other questions on stranded marine mammals in Alaska.

A big thank you to everyone who presented and attended the 2023 Stranding meeting!

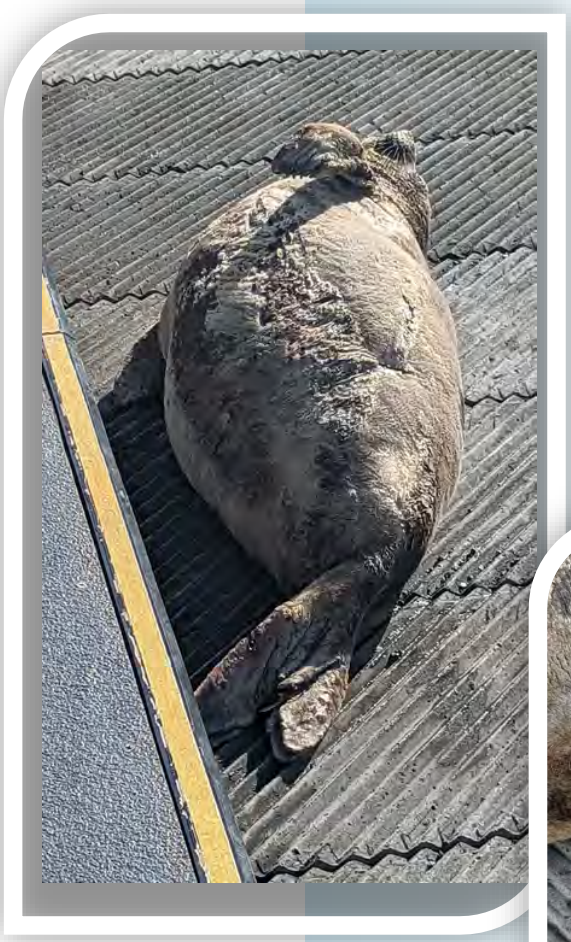
Northern elephant Seals

On April 17, 2023, we received our first report of a molting Northern elephant seal in Alaska. The young seal was hauled out in the grass near Women's Bay, Kodiak. This seal was in good condition and alert, without a flipper tag present, which would have identified its rookery. NOAA Office of Law Enforcement and the Sun'aq Tribe of Kodiak put up signs and monitored the seal's condition over several days. The elephant seal left the area on April 24th.

Learn more about
northern elephant seals

In 2022, we had several reports of young Northern elephant seals hauled out and molting on Alaska beaches. Seals were observed in Seward, Kodiak, and King Cove. Most Northern elephant seals were in good body condition, with some minor injuries and under going their catastrophic molt. Two seals were relocated as they were located in high traffic areas.

Please let us know if you see or hear of Northern elephant seals hauled out in your area and look for flipper tags present on their hind flippers (see below).



The green tag indicates this seal was born and tagged at Año Nuevo, California

2022014, Northern elephant seal, Seward

It is seal pupping season and as a reminder to the public we will once again conduct outreach requesting the public to leave seal pups on the beach and report them to the stranding hotline if the pup seems distressed or abandoned. We are also running radio and newspaper public service announcments in Nome, Anchorage, and Southeast Alaska, as well as social media posts featuring our AK seal pups (see below).

Petersburg Marine Mammal Center

The Petersburg Marine Mammal Center (SA-AKR-2022-09) has been a member of the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding and Entanglement Network since 2008. PMMC develops education and outreach programs, assists research efforts and disseminates information on research and sightings of marine mammals in Southeast Alaska. PMMC hosts a monthly Petersburg Science Series, teaches an annual science camp for middle school students and provides other marine science programs within the community.

Learn more about PMMC here and follow PMMC on Facebook Petersburg Marine Mammal Center – PMMC

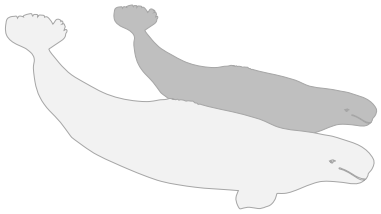
Most recently, on January 10, 2023, PMMC member Barry Bracken responded to a report of a Steller sea lion alive but in distress and attempting to come on shore in view of beachside Petersburg homes. The young sea lion appeared very emaciated. Unfortunately, the weak sea lion later became wedged between two small rocks and died with the incoming tide. PMMC was able to recover and freeze the young Steller sea lion and the carcass was transferred to Alaska Veterinary Pathology Services (AVPS) and a full necropsy was completed. The necropsy was also part of an education and outreach effort with 17 participants (11 in-person and 6 online) as part of AVPS's annual volunteer training.

The immediate cause of death was malnutrition with parasitism as a contributing factor. AVPS collected three types of parasites from the young sea lion (roundworms, tapeworms, and acanthocephalans), all of which will be transferred to the National Marine Lie Center (NMLC) in Buzzards Bay, MA. NMLC has a Prescott Grant that supports parasite identification. Histopathology is pending and additional test may be ordered depending on the findings.

2023003, alive on January 10, 2023 in Petersburg AK.

2023003 on January 10, 2023 shortly after being observed wedged between rocks.

Read Barry's first hand account of the stranding and response in PMMC Spring 2023 Newsletter



2023 Beluga Count!

Saturday, September 23, 2023, marks the 5th annual Belugas Count! This free family-friendly celebration, hosted by NOAA Fisheries and dozens of partners, is Alaska's largest one-day marine mammal educational event, aimed at raising awareness of the plight of this special whale, which is found only in Cook Inlet, and sharing how the public—local, national, and internationally—can support its recovery.

The 2023 event will celebrate both the 5th annual Belugas Count! and the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Endangered Species Act. The celebration will include multiple publically accessible beluga viewing stations throughout Cook Inlet, staffed by beluga experts from throughout the US. and free afternoon gatherings (Anchorage, Kenai (tentative)) with interactive educational activities for kids and adults, booths, and live presentations from experts.

To keep up to date on the latest event information, follow the Belugas Count! Facebook page.

For more information on how to become involved in the event
https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/endangered-species-conservation/belugas-count

Betty beluga and friends at the Bird Point Viewing Station in Turnagain Arm during the 2022 Beluga Count Event!

Thankful “fur” a second chance!

NOAA Law Enforcement Officer extending a net during the rescue of the young Northern fur seal.

On the afternoon of January 26, 2023, the Alaska SeaLife Center received a call about a small animal in the Sitka harbor - about 2 feet long with a pointy head, that was rolling side to side to propel its body through the water. “It might be a California sea lion pup,” he suggested. But whatever it was, it “wasn’t acting right.” A photo and a grainy video identified this unusual animal as a young northern fur seal.

A few days later, the seal was spotted again. This time she appeared lethargic, as she slowly spun around through an apparent oily sheen on the surface of the water. The pup’s curious behavior and deteriorating condition drove the decision to make a rescue attempt. With the assistance of Greg Stevenson and his boat, Jennifer Cedarleaf of the Sitka Raptor Center and NOAA Office of Law Enforcement were able to successfully catch the young fur seal, and get it on a flight to Anchorage on January 30th. She received a quick, midnight medical exam and fluids from Dr. Pam Tuomi with the assistance of vet tech Lindsey Van Houtan before staff transported her the following morning for a more in depth assessment at the SeaLife Center.

A young Northern fur seal (2023006, CU2301) at the Alaska SeaLife Center.

By:
Halley Werner and Savannah Costner Animal Care Specialists

While her behavior in Sitka was notably odd, veterinarians did not find any obvious signs of neurologic deficits. They did find an underweight, petite, 5 month old fur seal with crackling lung sounds and a parasite overload. Luckily her radiographs showed no evidence of advanced pneumonia and she responded well to antibiotic therapy. Her parasites cleared up well with treatments. Staff worked diligently to get her to eat on her own. After 5 long days she developed quite the appetite, eating herring, squid, eulachon, and capelin. Her strength and ability to thermoregulate increased quickly, allowing her to move to a larger pool.

During one of her anesthetized veterinary exams, a heart murmur was detected. Dr. Dawn Webber, a veterinary cardiologist from Arctic Echoes, graciously donated her time and expertise to come to Seward and examine the fur seal more closely. An echocardiogram and ECG determined that the heart murmur we heard was physiologic, meaning the murmur was temporary – likely secondary to stress or illness at the time – and her heart is fully functional.

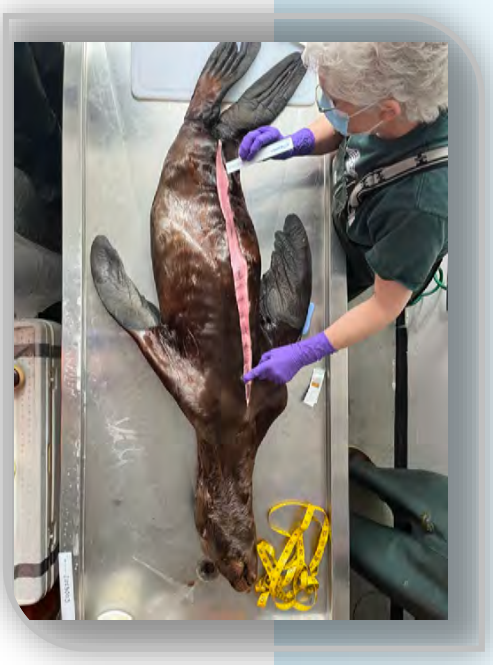
With her heart given the all clear, there have been many other considerations in regards to her releasability. Collaborations between NOAA, ASLC, The Marine Mammal Center, and northern fur seal biologist Mike Williams have been ongoing, in order to ensure the best possible outcome for this special patient. Though still petite, she has put on weight and is in good body condition. She has proven she is able to capture and kill live fish, and is free of infection and parasites. While she is currently residing in ASLC's largest rehabilitation pool, we are all working together towards a hopeful release in the near future.

Halley Werner and Savannah Costner help keep the patient calm as Dr. Dawn Webber performs an ultrasound of the fur seal's heart.

Highlight your efforts by submitting photos of stranding responses for use in outreach to:
mmhsrp.images@noaa.gov

2022165 Cook Inlet beluga whale
Alaska Veterinary Pathology Services

2023009 humpback whale, University of Alaska Sitka



2023003 Steller sea lion
Petersburg Marine Mammal Center &
Alaska Veterinary Pathology Services

2023009 humpback whale, University of Alaska Sitka

Marine Mammal Stranding Network

2022 Stranding Summary

In 2022, the stranding network received 245 confirmed reports of stranded marine mammals. The first stranding of 2022 was reported on January 2nd and the last stranding was on December 16th, with a peak in reports during the summer (Figure 1). The Gulf of Alaska had the majority of the reports, followed closely by the Bering Sea and then the Arctic Ocean (Figure 2). Locations of stranded cetaceans (Figure 3) and pinnipeds (Figure 4) are based on latitude and longitude from level A reports.

By:
Jamie Musbach
Alaska Sea Grant Fellow

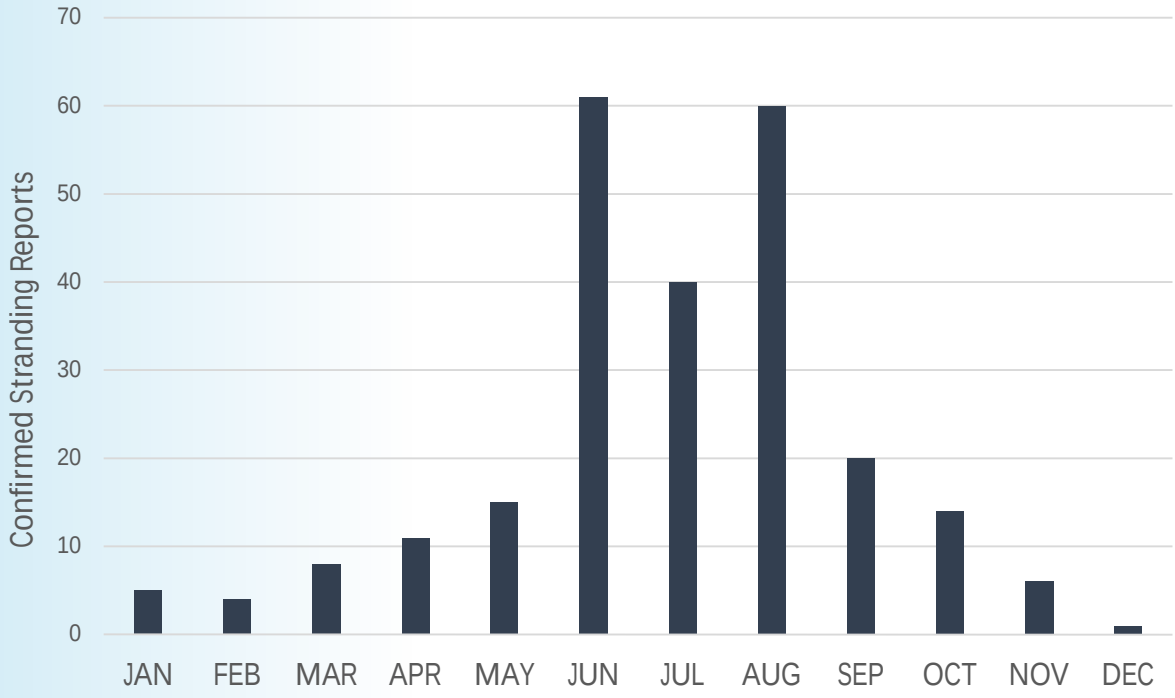


Figure 1. Confirmed stranding reports in 2022 by month.

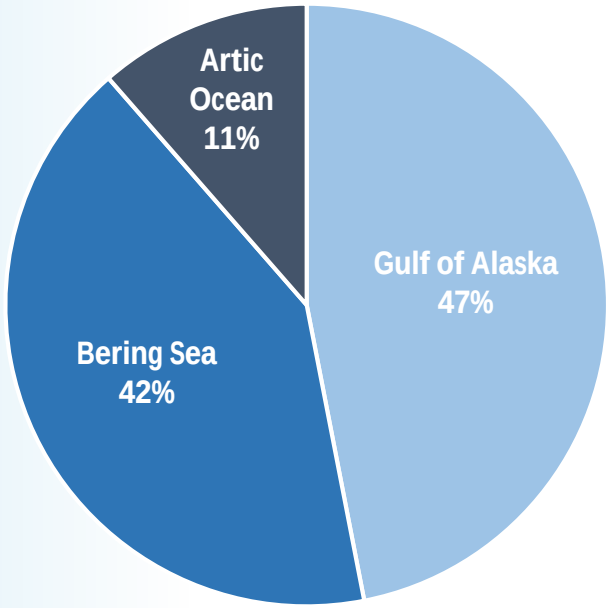


Figure 2. Proportion of confirmed stranding reports by geographic region for 2022.

*Data and figures were made using data as of April 20, 2023. Data subject to change as reports come in late or follow up investigations yield different results.

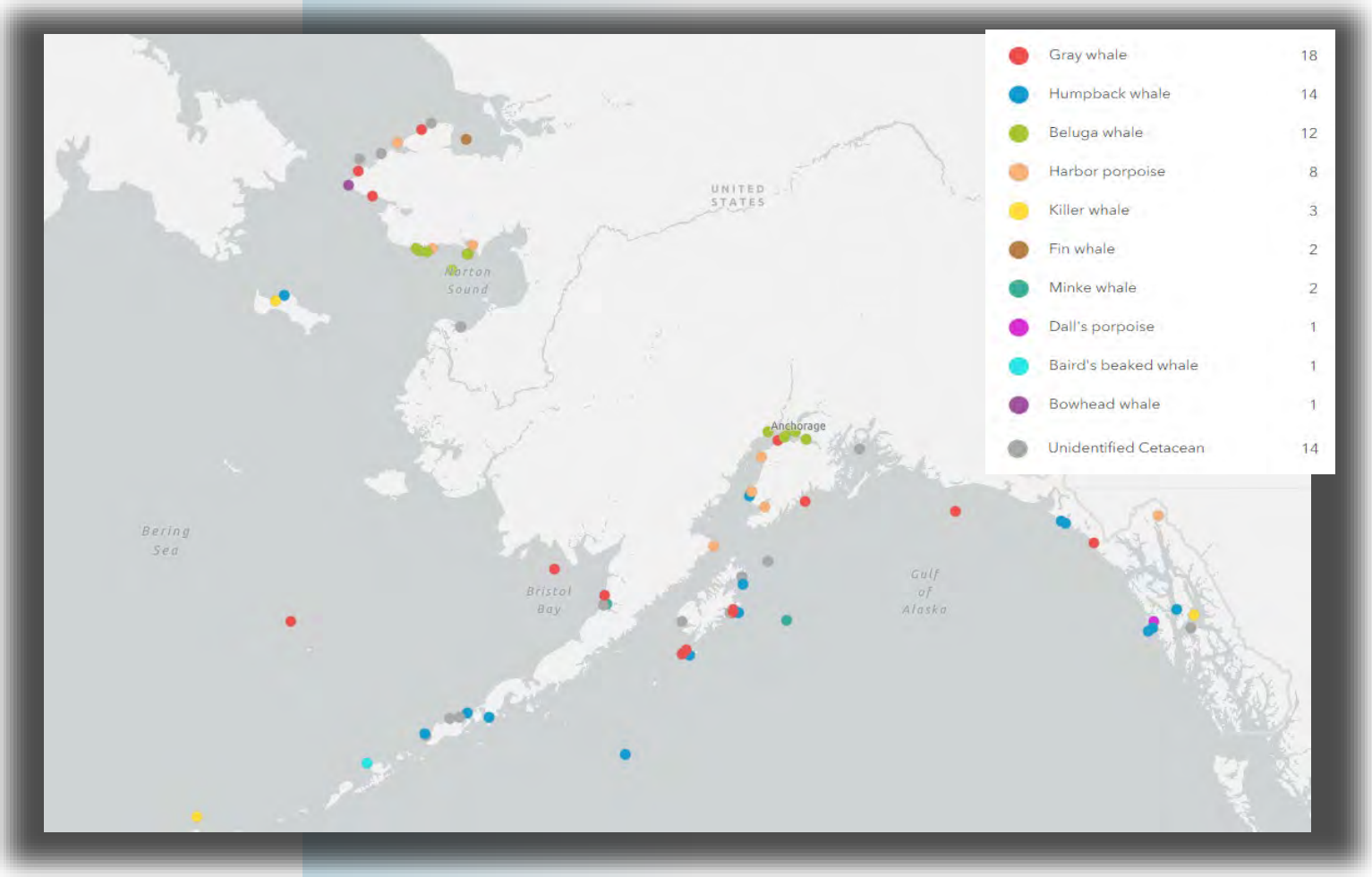
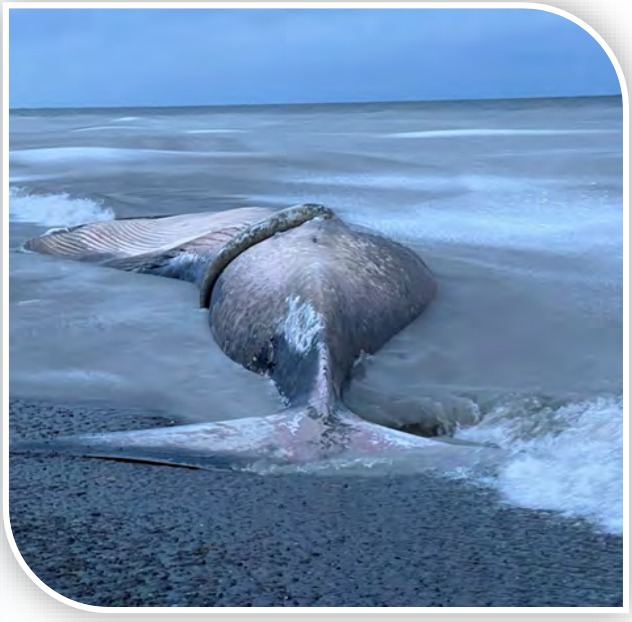


Figure 3. The locations of reported cetacean strandings in 2022. Entangled cetaceans are not included and are mapped separately in Figure 5. The three stranded whales in Utqiagvik- beluga, fin, and gray- are not included on this map but are included in the totals in the legend.



2022263, fin whale, Utqiagvik

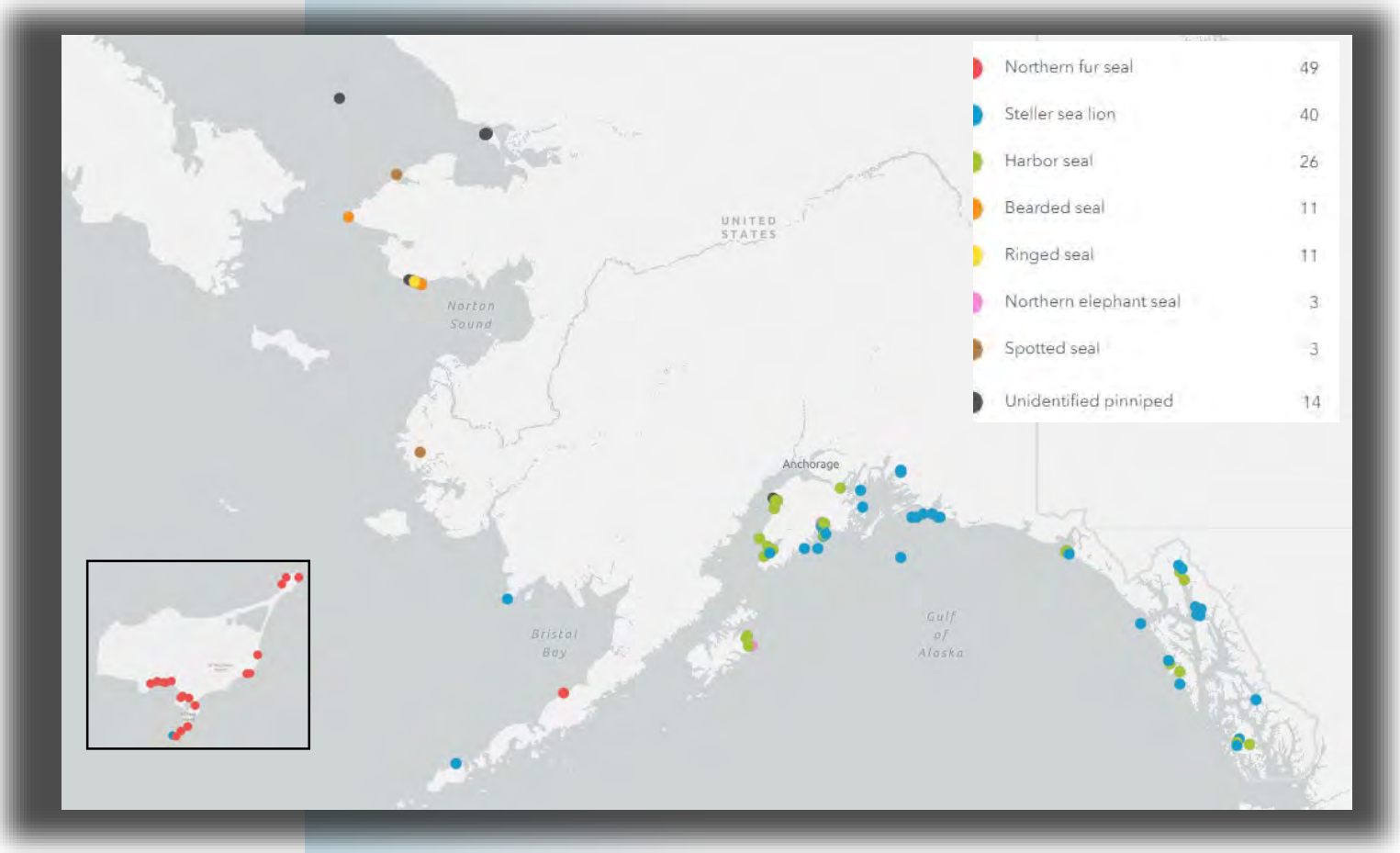
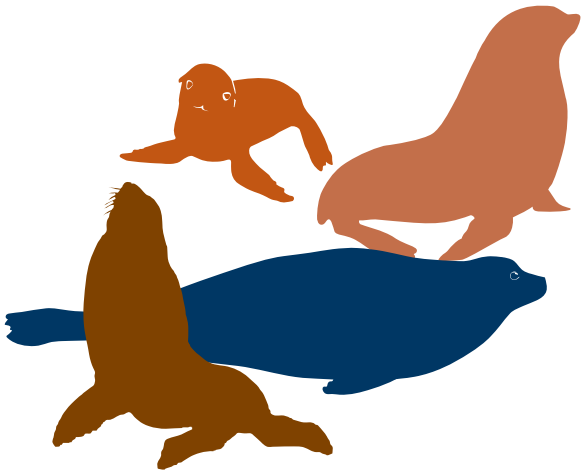


Figure 4. The locations of reported pinniped strandings in 2022. St. Paul Island is shown as an inset. Not included on this map but included in the totals are 7 ringed seals and 2 bearded seals in Utqiagvik.

2022048, live harbor seal pup, Kasilof



2022 Entanglement Summary

In order for a confirmed entangled pinniped to be considered a stranding it has to either be dead with evidence of an entanglement (gear present, scars) or alive and entangled with a successful response conducted. In 2022, the stranding network reported 51 confirmed pinniped entanglements (2 Steller sea lions; 49 northern fur seals) which is more than the 11 confirmed entangled pinnipeds in 2021 (3 Steller sea lions- all dead; 8 northern fur seals- all disentangled). Of the 51 confirmed pinniped entanglements reported in 2022, 49 were disentangled and one northern fur seal and one Steller sea lion had gear present when the carcasses was examined. Increased disentanglement effort by the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island (NOAA permit 23896) made up a majority of this year's entanglement reports. To learn more about the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island's Ecosystem Conservation Office disentanglement efforts see Finding Success in Failure by Chelsea Kovalcsik in the winter 2022 stranding newsletter.

2022153, Northern fur seal, St. Paul Island before disentanglement, Permit #23896

The NMFS Large Whale Entanglement Response Program (LWER) received 15 confirmed cetacean entanglement reports in 2022. In addition, the LWER Program received one unconfirmed report of a humpback whale interacting with and briefly entangled in recreational Dungeness crab pot gear in Fritz Cove in Juneau, Alaska. Humpback whales were the most commonly observed entangled cetacean in Alaska in 2022 with eight confirmed reports. There were also three killer whales, two harbor porpoises, one gray whale, and one unidentified large whale entanglements. Approximate locations of the confirmed entangled cetaceans are shown in Figure 5. These data are preliminary at this point–additional after-the-fact reports may be received in the future. The most common source of known entangling materials was gillnet (five confirmed entanglements), and there were also five entanglements involving line, buoys, or nets from unconfirmed sources (Figure 6).

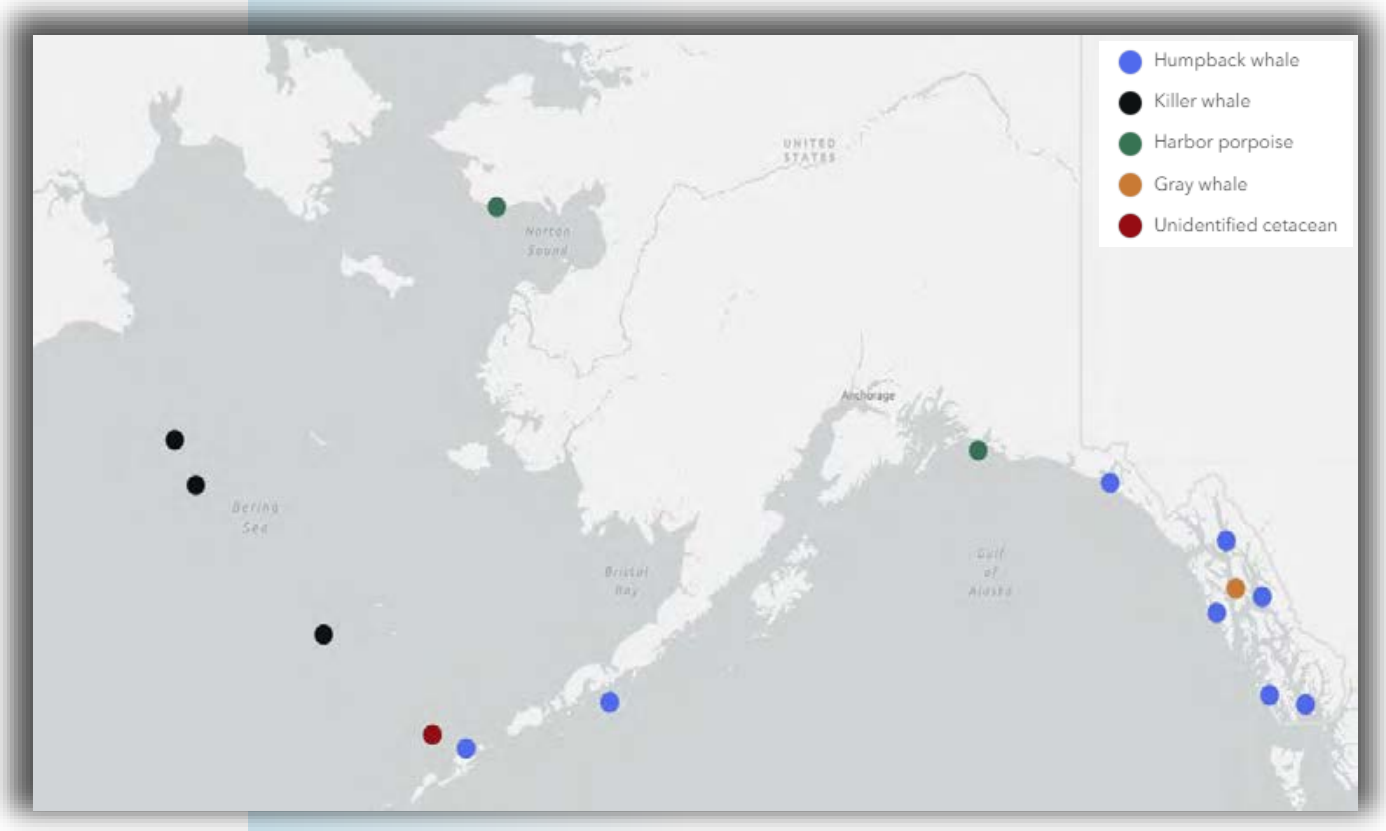


Figure 5. Entangled cetacean locations reported in 2022.

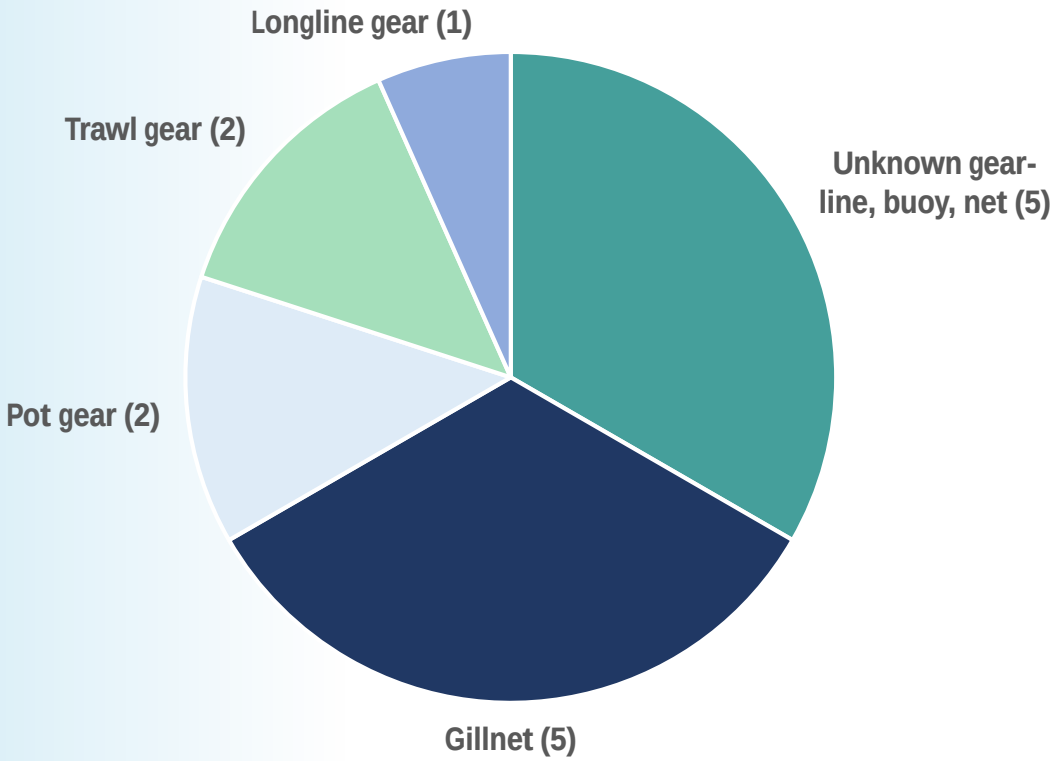


Figure 6. Proportion of entanglement materials reported for 2022 cetacean entanglements. Total entanglements in each category are in parenthesis.

CE2022_04 Humpback whale entangled in a salmon set gillnet. This whale was fully disentangled by the fishermen.

*As of September 2021, live entangled, in water, large cetaceans require level A and human interaction forms to be completed. See the 2024 Examiner Guide for information about this change.

NOAA FISHERIES

National Marine Fisheries Service
Alaska Regional Office

How Can I Help ?

Since early 2019, gray whales along the west coast and Alaska have been dying in higher than normal numbers.

Investigators are working on determining reasons behind the increased mortality. We are requesting help from members of the public and marine community.

Please report:

- Where you are seeing live whales,
- If they have strange behaviors,
- Any dead large whales.*

Report Live or Dead Gray Whales Immediately

If you see any live or dead gray whales, please take photos and call

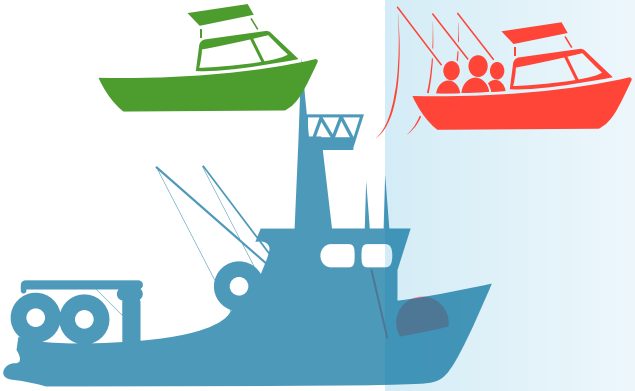
1-877-925-7773

or email

Kate.Savage@noaa.gov

Photo by Mark Kusbruk

* If you are not sure whether it s a gray whale, that s ok! Just take photos and call us with the information and we will figure it out.



2000 - 2022 Vessel Strike Summary

Confirmed Reports of Marine Mammal Vessel Strikes in Alaska

By:
Michelle Trifari
Alaska Sea Grant Fellow

Vessel strikes are a source of injury and mortality for marine mammals in Alaska but documenting these events can be challenging. Some challenges stem from a lack of reporting in remote areas of Alaska, vessel operators and crew being unaware that a strike occurred, and difficulty determining if a stranded animal's death is due to a boat collision. The Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network provides opportunistic data collection on vessel strike events in the region through public reports. The 24-Hour Stranding Hotline (*1-877-925-7773*) presents a pathway for individuals who strike, witness a strike, or observe a carcass to report the incident to NOAA Fisheries and provide details on the event.

Live strikes

From 2000 - 2022, we received 98 confirmed vessel strike reports of live marine mammals in Alaskan waters (Figure 1). The number of reports were variable throughout the years with a range of 1 to 9 reports each year (Figure 2). Vessel strikes of live marine mammals also varied by species and region within Alaska (Figure 3). Of the reported marine mammal species, humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) were the most common species involved in vessel strike incidences, and Southeast Alaska had the highest number of reported strikes (Figure 3). More vessel traffic, easier communications, and more observers on the water in Southeast Alaska, in part due to the tourism industry (e.g., cruises, whale watching, recreational fishing, etc.) may be responsible for the increase in reports relative to more remote areas of Alaska. In an effort to reduce vessel strikes, NOAA Fisheries issued a final rule to establish measures to protect humpback whales in waters within 200 nautical miles of Alaska in 2001. Under these regulations, Federal law requires vessels to remain at least 100 yards away from humpback whales in Alaska waters.

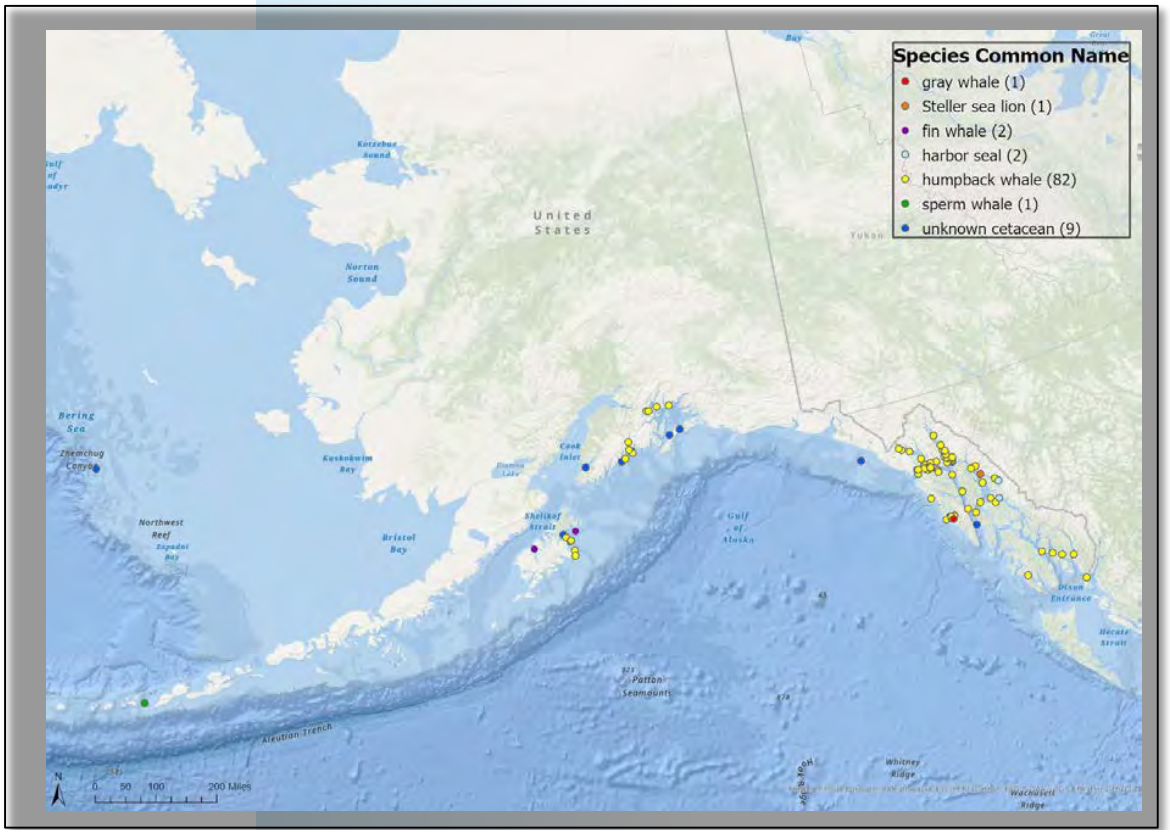


Figure 1. Locations of confirmed vessel strike reports of live marine mammals by species and region in Alaskan waters between 2000 and 2022.

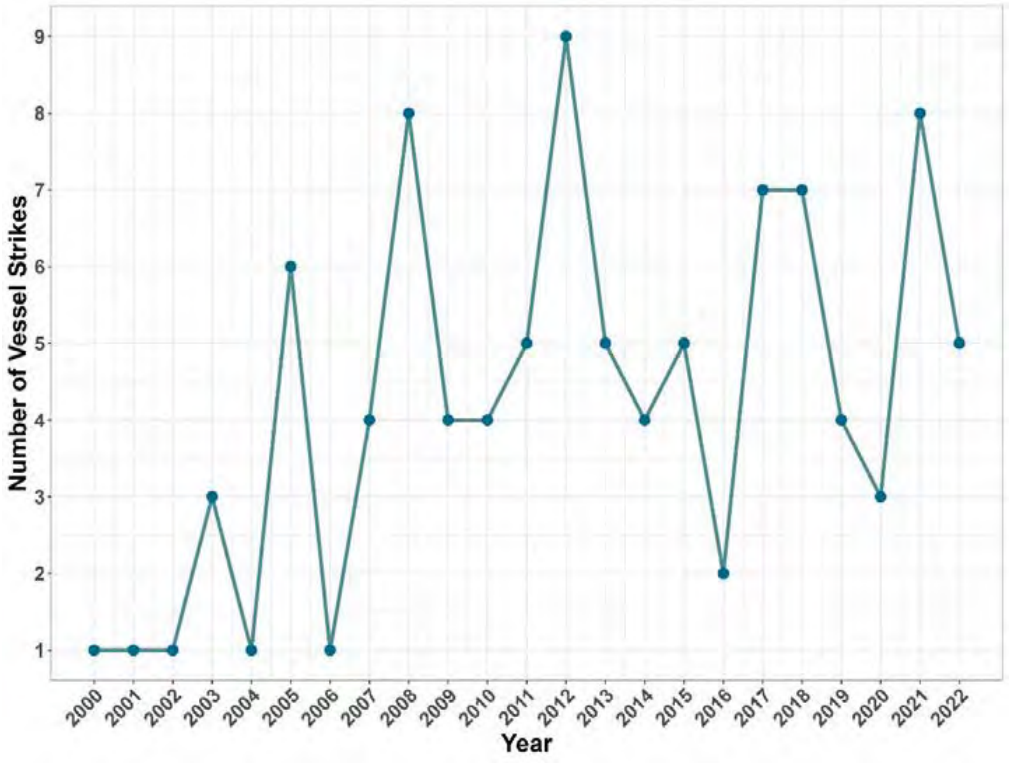


Figure 2. Confirmed vessel strike reports of live marine mammals from 2000 – 2022.

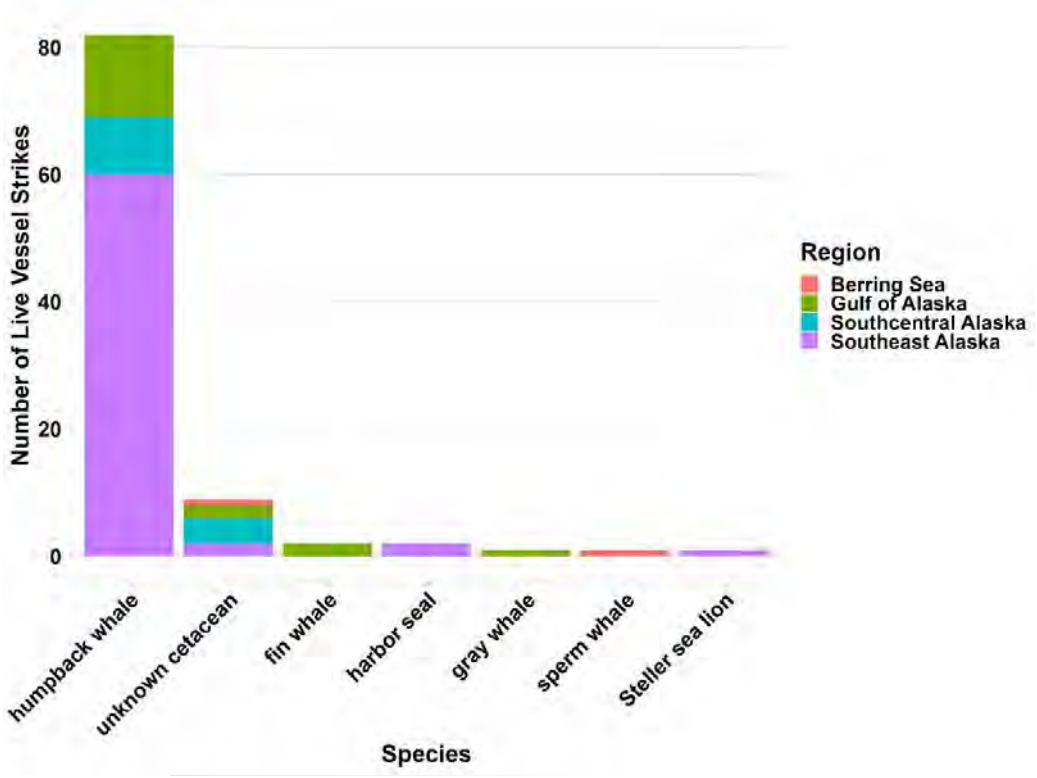


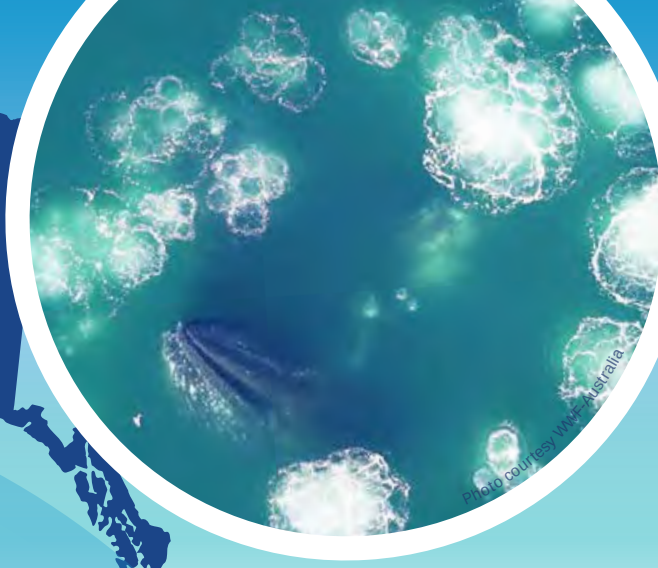
Figure 3. All confirmed vessel strike reports of live marine mammals by species and region in Alaskan waters between 2000 and 2022.

Carcasses

There are cases in Alaskan waters where marine mammal carcasses are initially found on the bulbous bow of a large ship, floating in the water, or washed onshore. Further investigation, such as performing a necropsy or external exam, is necessary to determine if a vessel strike is likely responsible for the stranding event and mortality of the animal. From 2000 - 2022, 36 carcasses found in Alaskan waters showed evidence of potential vessel strike. About 28% of the marine mammals carcasses were initially observed on the bulbous bow of a large ship (Figure 4); however, determining if an animal was deceased prior to ending up on the bulbous bow can be difficult to determine. Approximately 28% of marine mammals were initially observed on shore, and about 42% were initially observed floating. Evidence of sharp trauma (*e.g.,* propeller marks) and blunt force trauma (*e.g.,* internal hemorrhaging, bone fractures) are indicators of injuries caused by vessel strikes.

Figure 4. Deceased fin whale on bulbous bow of ship (2014093, Seward).

Give whales BUBBLE room



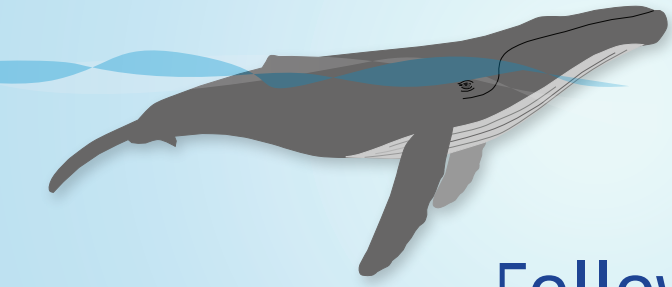
In Alaska,

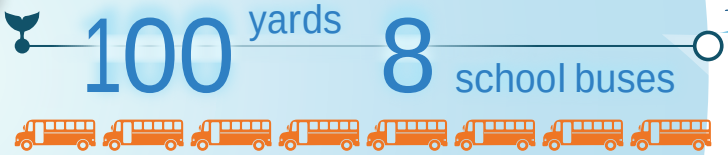
Federal humpback whale approach regulations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act require that you:

- ✗ Not approach within 100 yards of a humpback whale
- ✗ Not place your vessel in the path of oncoming humpback whales causing them to surface within 100 yards of your vessel
- ✗ Not disrupt the normal behavior or prior activity of a humpback whale
- ✓ Operate your vessel at a slow, safe speed when near a humpback whale

Please don't burst my bubble!

I give whales personal bubble space for their safety and mine





Follow these tips:

Don't let your vessel's presence bubble over
Limit your viewing time to 30 minutes

A whale could pop up at any time!
Use a wide berth in areas that you see whale watching vessels idling or traveling slowly

Don't be in your own bubble
Use VHF radio to coordinate with other boaters to reduce crowding and to avoid ship strike

Reduce your spray
Go slow when approaching and departing whales

Expand your bubble
Give more space when watching groups or mother-calf pairs

Whale SENSE ALASKA REGION

Choose Whale SENSE operators when booking whale watching tours

Report violations in Alaska to NOAA Enforcement at 1-800-853-1964

NOAA FISHERIES Alaska Region

NMFS Stranding Program Contacts

Mandy Keogh
Regional Stranding Coordinator
907-209-0637
Mandy.Keogh@noaa.gov

Barbara Mahoney
Assistant Stranding Coordinator
Parts Transfer Authorizations and Tracking
907-271-3448
Barbara.Mahoney@noaa.gov

Sadie Wright
Assistant Stranding Coordinator
Large Whale Entanglement Response Coordinator
907-586-7630
Sadie.Wright@noaa.gov

Caroline Cummings
Marine Mammal Specialist
Caroline.Cummings@noaa.gov

Kim Raum-Suryan
Pinniped Entanglement Coordinator
907-586-7424
Kim.Raum-Suryan@noaa.gov

Kate Savage, DVM
Health Specialist
Kate.Savage@noaa.gov

24-hour stranding hotline:
1-877-925-7773