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Thursday, October 22, 2009

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Blue Whale Beached -- Flipper to be Amputated?



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October 22, 2009—The apparent victim of a ship collision, a dead 70-foot (20-meter) blue whale (pictured) washed ashore in a forbidding northern California cove this week.

Though unable to move the blue whale, scientists and students are leaping at the research opportunity, scrambling down rock faces to take tissue samples and eventually one of the 11-foot-long (3.5-meter-long) flippers.

Though relatively infrequent off California until recent years, ship collisions are "the number one human threat to blue whales," according to marine biologist Joe Cordaro of the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service.

This week's collision, he said, marks the second time this year that a ship off California has fatally wounded a blue whale.

(Related "High-Tech Sound Detectors to Warn Ships of Right Whales.")

The world's largest animals, blue whales can grow to about a hundred feet (30 meters) long—about the length of a space shuttle. Listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the whales are said to face a very high risk of extinction in the wild, largely due to heavy hunting prior to a 1966 ban.

(Related: "Baby Blue Whale Caught on Film Underwater.")

A Shudder and, Later, a Beached Blue Whale

On Monday, Cordaro received a report from a ship mapping the seafloor for the fisheries service. The researchers had "felt a shudder underneath the ship" about 7 miles (11 kilometers) from shore.

Soon after, a whale surfaced, bleeding profusely, Cordaro said. Several hours later, the beached blue whale was spotted near the city of Fort Bragg.

Given the evidence—timing, location, a fresh propeller wound—Cordaro said, "I don't think there's any doubt" that the mapping ship is the culprit.

Blue Whale Tragedy Turned Scientific Windfall

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"I'm as sorry as anybody that that animal perished," said Humboldt State University mammologist Thor Holmes (pictured above atop the whale). But to find "a fresh, female blue whale in a place that's accessible—that is amazing."

On Tuesday, Holmes and two students drove several hours to study the blue whale.

After he'd scrambled down the "scary" rock faces, he told the eager students to stay put for their own safety. "Man, I knew from the looks on their faces there was an insurrection brewing," he said. The others eventually found another, wetter way around.

On the shore, the researchers took blubber samples, which Holmes expects will shed light on the whale's pre-collision health.

"Just the fact that the whale has a good, thick blubber layer," he said, "shows it was a really, really healthy animal."

Blue Whale to Be Left in Place

The blue whale will be left on the Fort Bragg beach, the National Marine Fisheries Service's Cordaro said. Given the cove's inaccessibility to vehicles, he added, "That whale ain't going anywhere."

But researchers are planning more tests, including an amputation of one of the blue whale's flippers this week—a potential windfall for an ongoing Humboldt State study comparing the limbs of cetaceans, which include whales, dolphins, and porpoises.

The university is also sending more students to examine the rare specimen, and a dermatologist at Humboldt is hoping to secure hair follicles for study.

For Holmes, the specimen holds great scientific promise, but also serves as a painful reminder of humanity's role in the blue whale's rarity.

"The presence of that animal on the beach," he said, "is another sign that we're malefactors on this planet."

—Ted Chamberlain

Blue whale photograph by Larry Wagner, AP

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