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Deal on the seal: Hungry and feisty

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Alive, hungry and apparently a little ornery.

That was the update Monday from the Virginia Aquarium, where an ice seal found on Wrightsville Beach last week was moved for observation.

The animal, now confirmed as a juvenile hooded seal between 6 and 18 months old, was discovered early Friday morning eating sand on the beach near the Oceanic Pier.

Staff in Virginia have named the seal Bald Bill, in part because he is molting and, likely, for one of his North Carolina rescuers, UNCW research assistant Bill McLellan, the state's marine mammal stranding coordinator.

Susan Barco, the aquarium's stranding response coordinator, said it was too early to tell when or if Bald Bill could be returned to the wild.

But officials think his prognosis is headed in the right direction.

"Guarded, but good," Barco said of Bald Bill's condition. "But as far as attitude-wise, he's got the right attitude."



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

That's because along with eating herring, the seal had chomped on a staff member's hand and the power cord of an X-ray machine over the weekend.

"It's quite feisty, which is a good sign," Barco said.

But it will take a little longer to find out if the seal has any serious health concerns beyond a respiratory infec-

tion, a common ailment in the flippered patients the aquarium sees.

"He came in very dehydrated, and sometimes we can't really determine what other problems there are until they get their hydration back up because everything else is so off-kilter," Barco said.

It's also too early to tell what prompted the seal to take a several-

thousand-mile-long detour from his normal stomping grounds north of the Canadian Maritime provinces, Barco said.

This was the seventh hooded seal to be taken in by the Virginia Aquarium, which treats stranded marine mammals from up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

Two more seals were discovered beached in Florida on Sunday.

That has prompted some researchers to postulate that global warming could be affecting the Arctic pack ice, which ice seals depend on for habitat.

But Barco cautioned that any hypothesis for the large number of strandings, which mirrored a similar spell in 2001, was simply speculation at this point.

In the meantime, officials intend to watch and wait and see how Bald Bill, probably also so named due to the premature stress-related molting of his hairy coat, responds to medication.

Oh, and keep arms and power cords away also.