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Long Way From Home: Officials not sure how Arctic seal ended up at Wrightsville Beach

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Staff Writer

WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH | He wasn't exactly the Crocodile Hunter wrestling a 15-foot-long saltwater crocodile into submission Friday morning near the town's Oceanic Pier.

But after putting a blanket over a roughly 4-foot-long seal and straddling the animal, Paul Barrington and others with the local marine mammal stranding network loaded the unusual visitor into a crate for a trip to the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center in Virginia Beach.

"The blanket calms it down and gives you something to hold onto because they can give a nasty bite if you're not careful," said Barrington, director of husbandry and operations at the N.C. Aquarium at Fort Fisher, after the seal was loaded onto his pickup.

First spotted early Friday morning, the Arctic ice seal - likely a young hooded seal - isn't supposed to be found in coastal North Carolina.

"An ice seal, by definition, is out of habitat when it's found this far south," said Ann Pabst, a marine biologist at the University of North

Carolina Wilmington.

Officials intervened because the animal was so obviously off course and because it had begun eating sand, an action Pabst said imitated the eating of ice that it would do in its native habitat.

Even so, the seal didn't appear to be in bad shape, Pabst said.

"It's not showing any signs of being emaciated, so it's had some success as a predator," she said as the seal growled and swung its head at curious beachgoers who came a little too close.

Friday's stranding, while generally rare this far south, has been occurring with alarming frequency along the East Coast this year.

Wendy Walton, a veterinarian technician with the Virginia Aquarium's stranding program, said ice seals have been found beached as far south as Florida and the Caribbean, with a half-dozen of the wayward sea mammals ending up at her facility in the past two months.

That has researchers looking for causes because the southern range of hooded seals normally stops around

the Canadian Maritime provinces.

"But it's all speculation at this point," Walton said, alluding to talk that global warming was causing the disappearance of Arctic pack ice, which the seals depend on for habitat. "That's why, although we don't like to see strandings, every little bit of information helps, even if they don't make it."

Walton said it was too early to say whether the animal would recover and be released back into the wild. But she said other flipped visitors to the aquarium have been nursed back to health, even after consuming large quantities of sand and shells.

Back at Wrightsville Beach, the unusual visitor had brightened an otherwise dreary day at the beach, where only surfers braved the cool waters.

Jeanette Phillips, visiting from Mars Hill, said she didn't know what it was when she saw first the seal.

"Our groundhogs get that big up in the mountains, but I was pretty sure it wasn't one of them," she said, smiling.

Phillips, who visits Wrightsville Beach nearly every year, said the

only seals she had seen previously were in an aquarium.

"I certainly wasn't expecting to see one down here," Phillips said.

"Much less an ice seal."



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

Paul Barrington An Ice seal believed to be a hooded seal rest along the shoreline at Wrightsville Beach near the Oceanic Pier Friday September 15, 2006.