

RARE SPECIMEN

UNCW helps retrieval for Smithsonian's collection

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CAROLINA BEACH - The stench from the decomposed mammal half-buried on the north end of Carolina Beach was strong enough Monday to attract a pair of wandering dogs and several curious sea gulls.

But the pungent smell did little to distract officials from the Smithsonian Institution who had trekked south from Washington to collect the whale carcass that washed ashore nearly three weeks ago.

"This really is a wonderful opportunity to get to know about an animal we know very little about," said Charley Potter, the Smithsonian's collection manager for marine mammals. "And to have a nice, fresh specimen like this where we were able to observe it quickly and harvest tissue samples is a real find."

Joined by researchers from the University of North Carolina at Wilming-



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Its body was buried in two other piles a few hundred feet away.

"The skull, for species identification, is the most important part, so that's why we buried it over here, a little out of the way," said Ann

Pabst, a UNCW marine biologist, when asked why the whale's head and flippers had been buried back in the dunes.

When the whale was first spotted on the beach that unusually warm March 13 morning, the carcass quickly drew a crowd.

But on this blustery day, with a wind-chill factor in the 30s, there were no interested bystanders.

Even if it had been warmer, the smell probably would have quickly driven them away.

"We're talking about some ripe fish here," joked Carolina Beach equipment operator James Banks, who suddenly found himself downwind as he maneuvered his backhoe to drop the whale's 8-foot head and upper jaw into the trailer.

Researchers had initially classified the 36-foot mammal as a Sei whale, a deep-ocean whale rarely spotted off the Carolina Coast.

But Dr. Pabst said researchers now think the carcass is that of a Bryde's whale, a mammal that normally sticks to tropical and subtropical waters.

Even in those waters, the whale is a rare sight. A 1995 survey by the National Marine Fisheries Service of the northern Gulf of Mexico – the closest known large population group to North Carolina – recorded no sightings of Bryde's whales.

"It's neat to see a species we probably won't see again in our lifetimes," said Dr. Pabst, armed with a shovel as she prepared to jump back into the pit and help unearth the whale's head. "It just doesn't happen very often



STAFF PHOTOS | MARK COURTNEY

UNCW marine biologist **Ann Pabst** works Monday in the pit where the skull of a Bryde's whale was buried after the mammal washed up in mid-March at Carolina Beach.

these days that you don't know what you have, so that's kind of exciting.

She added that results from tissue sampling, which would confirm the whale's species, should be back by the end of April.

The initial explanation for the animal's death, a fishing line wrapped around its mouth that slowly starved the whale to death, remains unquestioned.

"There's nothing that we've learned that would make us back away from that," Dr. Pabst said.

The line had been attached to the whale for so long that the emaciated animal's skin had begun to grow around where the fishing gear had gouged into its head.

After a few swipes with the backhoe and carefully removing the flippers, the small team maneuvered around the whale's skull.

The blue tarp that covered the head was then pulled back – and that's when the smell went from mildly annoying to almost nauseating.

Mr. Potter, seemingly immune to the stench, said the skeleton could be the first Bryde's whale specimen added to the museum's collection in about a century.

"We just don't know a lot about these animals at all," he said.

Mr. Potter said the skeleton – along with the tissue and organ samples taken earlier – could offer researchers a wealth of data to compare and contrast with known information about the species, much of which comes from animals caught by whalers nearly a century ago.

But Dr. Pabst said more than just biological information can be learned from the dead whale. "This shows that anything we put in the water can end up in a whale's mouth," she said.

After being sliced and then buried on the beach, officials said the whale isn't headed for a much more restful time in suburban Maryland, where the Smithsonian stores its marine mammal collection.

The carcass will be dunked in a tub of compost – primarily horse manure – to help with the removal of skin, muscle and tissue from the bones. After a few months, the bones will be removed from the compost for a final cleaning before being cataloged and stored.

Mr. Potter said the specimen would then be available as a resource for researchers nationally and worldwide.