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Whale washes ashore

Rare mammal being studied to determine cause of death

BY GARETH McGRATH
Staff Writer

One of the least known and most bizarre-looking mammals was found washed up on the beach of this New Hanover County town Wednesday morning.

"This is a really rare event," said Bill McLellan as he surveyed the dense beaked whale, which had been placed on a trailer for transport to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington for a necropsy.

The 14-foot horned whale – which actually has teeth protruding from the top of its head – was found around 7 a.m. beached near the Kure Beach-Carolina Beach town line.

Because of the abrasions on its dorsal fin and rump, it is believed the mature adult male whale thrashed around on the beach before dying.

"We don't know what could have brought it this close to shore," said Ann Pabst, head of UNCW's marine mammal stranding program, noting that the marine mammal favors deep water. "It certainly was an animal out of its element."

The whale, also known as Blainville's whale, didn't appear to have any outward signs of injuries.

"There's no obvious wounds, no gill nets or fishing action visible," said Mr. McLellan, a research associate with UNCW's stranding program.

Nets, hooks and lines are often found entwined around dead sea turtles and marine mammals, including a Bryde's whale that washed ashore on the north end of Carolina Beach last March.

That led to some discussion of whether the whale was a victim of the Navy's low-frequency active sonar,

which the military says it needs to detect the new generation of stealthy submarines.

Whale strandings have been reported over the years around locations where sonar testing has taken place. Necropsies of whales in the Bahamas in 2002 showed they had hemorrhaging associated with acoustic trauma in their inner ears and some cranial spaces.

But Dr. Pabst said any talk about the military's involvement in the whale's death was purely speculative.

"Yes, they are a species potentially vulnerable to that," she said as she carried a piece of whale blubber into UNCW's Dobo Hall. "But we've found no indications of that right now."

Navy spokesman Paul Taylor stressed that the service works hard to minimize any impact to marine mammals during testing and exercises. Measures range from visual to acoustic and, if needed, passive responses to shoo animals away.

"We take our environmental stewardship very seriously," Mr. Taylor said, adding that the Navy was checking if it had conducted recent exercises around Southeastern North Carolina.

Just to make sure sonar didn't play a role in the whale's death, researchers intended to freeze the head and send it to the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts for testing.

The only other wounds on the whale were several sets of scratches along its sides. Mr. McLellan said the marks were caused by the toothy horns of other males, probably during sparring contests for females.

Dense beaked whales are believed



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

A dense beaked whale waits to be transported to UNCW for a necropsy. The whale beached just north of Kure Beach Pier early Wednesday.

to inhabit most tropical and sub-tropical waters around the world, sticking to the deep water to prey on squid. The species population isn't known, but Dr. Pabst said they aren't thought to be very common. She said scientists have samples from fewer than a dozen specimens from the Atlantic.

"This isn't a well-known creature because we don't come across them that often," Dr. Pabst said.

James Mead, curator of marine mammals at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum, said only 47 dense beaked whales have been recorded in the United States in the past 200 years – and only three adult males in North Carolina.

But what makes Wednesday's stranding special is the chance to properly examine a complete specimen.

"That makes it really, really rare because the chance of having a fresh animal transported to a facility where

you can do a decent dissection is very small," Mr. Mead said. "It's a real biological treasure trove."

The tissue, blubber and other samples taken from the Pleasure Island whale are expected to become part of the standard for dense beaked whale research around the world – in part because there isn't much other data out there.

"We know enough about them to realize that we don't know a whole lot," Mr. Mead said chuckling.

Pausing after carving another piece of blubber from the dark gray mammal, Dr. Pabst said the opportunity to examine the whale in detail should help expand both knowledge about dense beaked whales and potentially the impacts human actions are having on a neighbor it barely knows.

"It's exciting because this is going to be the first animal investigated to this degree," she said.