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The Marine Mammal Center confirms ship strike as cause of death for gray whale at San Francisco's Ocean Beach

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – May 7, 2019) – Scientists at The Marine Mammal Center confirm the gray whale that stranded at Ocean Beach in San Francisco died from blunt force trauma that can be attributed to a ship strike. By investigating deaths like this, the Center is able to identify and respond to both rapidly changing environmental trends and human impacts on marine mammal populations.

“We’re incredibly concerned to discover the death of four gray whales due to ship strikes already this year, along with deaths attributed to malnutrition,” says Dr. Pdraig Duignan, Chief Research Pathologist at The Marine Mammal Center. “While this is a tragic discovery, the information gathered from these whales is shared directly with our partners, helping inform policy decisions that can protect habitat areas, change shipping lane speeds that intersect migration routes and better understand shifting food sources for marine mammals.”

During the necropsy, scientists discovered multiple fractures to the animal’s skull and upper vertebrae with significant bruising and hemorrhaging in the surrounding area consistent with blunt force trauma as a result of a ship strike. The Center’s scientists identified the gray whale as a 41-foot adult female that was in the early stages of decomposition based on the quality of the skin condition and internal tissues. The team also noted that the whale was in poor body condition with a thinner than usual blubber layer.

Whales and other marine mammals face numerous human-caused threats and solutions must be found to protect healthy and vulnerable species alike. The Marine Mammal Center is committed to partnering with organizations and individuals to provide data and find solutions to prevent these deaths in the future.

Biologists have observed gray whales in poor body condition during their annual migration this year potentially due to anomalous oceanographic conditions over the past few years that have contributed to shifting food sources. Increased numbers of gray whales have been sighted in the San Francisco Bay as the population continues their northerly migration this spring.

Climate change affects water temperatures and prey availability, leading to shifting food sources for marine mammal populations and other marine species. Overfishing can also lead to reduced prey availability. Effective policies are critical to protect vulnerable marine mammal populations from the many human-caused threats they face in the wild.

“As gray whale migration season enters its final stages of the season, adult female gray whales and their calves with low body reserves are the last to migrate northward to their feeding grounds in the Arctic,” said Dr. Duignan. “These mother whales are worn out and running on empty, making them even more susceptible to negative human interactions, including ship strikes and entanglements.”

The necropsy was completed Tuesday morning by scientists from The Marine Mammal Center and its partners at California Academy of Sciences. More than a dozen interns and students from around the

world participated in the investigation to learn more about marine mammal health. The Marine Mammal Center collected tissue samples to contribute to baseline data and various research studies. The California Academy of Sciences archived the whale's pelvic bones and baleen for their archive collection.

The Center has completed necropsies on nine gray whales so far in 2019. Four whales died due to ship strikes, and four were due to malnutrition. The cause of death for the eighth whale in Point Reyes National Seashore has not yet been determined. Blunt-force trauma from ship strikes, malnutrition and entanglements are the most common causes of death in whales. The Marine Mammal Center's research team has investigated.

The Marine Mammal Center's rescue team first received reports from members of the public of this dead whale early Monday morning. The Center has responded to more than 80 gray whales in its 44-year history.

Officials at Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) are working through plans for future disposal of the whale's remains at Ocean Beach. The GGNRA advises that members of the public and their pets to keep a safe distance from the whale as tidal conditions may cause the whale to move from its current location.

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA - 2019 GRAY WHALE NECROPSY RESULTS:

March 10, 2019: San Francisco Bay; Cause of death: malnutrition

March 11, 2019: San Francisco Bay; Cause of death: malnutrition

April 02, 2019: Rodeo, CA; Cause of death: malnutrition

April 10, 2019: San Mateo, CA; Cause of death: ship strike

April 13, 2019: Richmond, CA; Cause of death: suspected ship strike

April 13, 2019: Hercules CA; Cause of death: malnutrition

April 16, 2019: Pacifica, CA; Cause of death: ship strike

April 30, 2019: Point Reyes National Seashore; Cause of death: pending investigation results

May 6, 2019: San Francisco, CA; Cause of death: ship strike

BACKGROUND ON GRAY WHALES: Gray whales are one of the most frequently sighted whales in California. The cetaceans can be seen passing by California in December and January during their southern migration, and again in April and May on their northern journey. Gray whales are medium-sized whales, reaching up to 45 feet (14 m) in length, with the females usually being larger than the males. They are distinguishable by their gray coloration with white patches, mostly consisting of areas where barnacles and lice have attached themselves to the whale. The Eastern population found along the U.S. and Canadian coast was delisted from the Endangered Species Act in 1994. Gray whales make the longest yearly migration of any whale at roughly 11,000 miles, traveling between Baja California and Alaska in a single trip. To learn more about The Marine Mammal Center's whale necropsy work, listen to our podcast, Sentinels of the Sea, found here: <http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/about-us/News-Room/2018-newsarchives/podcasts.html>.

HOW THE PUBLIC CAN HELP:

- Report sick and injured marine mammals to The Marine Mammal Center by calling 415-289- SEAL (7325).
- Maintain a safe distance of at least 50 feet from a stranded cetacean and keep dogs away.
- The Marine Mammal Center is a nonprofit and depends on donations from members of the public to respond to and care for marine mammals and conduct critical scientific research. Visit MarineMammalCenter.org/donate to help the Center perform its life-saving work.

ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER:

The Marine Mammal Center was founded in 1975 by three local citizens: Lloyd Smalley, Pat Arrigoni and Paul Maxwell. Since then, and thanks to their vision, the Center is now a global leader in marine mammal health, science and conservation and is the world's largest marine mammal hospital in the world. The Marine Mammal Center's mission is to advance global ocean conservation through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education.

For more information, please visit MarineMammalCenter.org. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).