



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact: Giancarlo Rulli (415) 754-4012 Media@tmmc.org

Endangered Hawaiian monk seal airlifted to Hawai'i Island hospital for monk seals due to injuries from suspected dog attack

The successful rescue effort of RK58 marks the second endangered seal The Marine Mammal Center has admitted from the Main Hawaiian Islands in just two weeks

(KAILUA-KONA, HAWAI'I – February 25, 2021) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world's largest marine mammal hospital, admitted an endangered Hawaiian monk seal at its hospital in Kailua-Kona after the animal's health took a turn for the worse due to a suspected dog attack. The successful rescue of RK58, a juvenile male seal, was made possible thanks to the Center's partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Coast Guard, Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and the Marine Mammal Response Network team on Kaua'i.

"Rapid action is critical in these unique situations in order to provide seals like RK58 a second chance at life," says Dr. Sophie Whoriskey, Hawaiian Monk Seal Conservation Veterinarian at The Marine Mammal Center. "We are grateful to our responding partners for their quick actions as the survival of each individual is critical to the recovery of this endangered population."

NOAA and DLNR staff and volunteers were actively monitoring RK58 on Kaua'i and expressed concern after he was recently sighted in poor body condition with large swelling on his head. NOAA experts quickly decided to rescue and transport RK58 directly to The Marine Mammal Center where veterinarians can stabilize him, look for underlying conditions that might explain his body condition, and provide long-term rehabilitative care. On Tuesday, February 16, RK58 was airlifted from Kaua'i to Hawai'i Island via a U.S. Coast Guard C-130 aircraft, the safest and fastest mode of transport during the pandemic.

"RK58's puncture wounds are most likely the result of a dog attack, and thanks to the thorough assessment from The Marine Mammal Center, it is clear that he was struggling to recover from these impacts on his own," says Jamie Thomson, the Kaua'i Marine Mammal Response Program Coordinator with NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. "We are so grateful for the partnerships that allowed him to be rapidly rescued, transported and treated and we ask the public to please keep their dogs on leash while at the beach."

During his initial critical care period, Center veterinarians noted that RK58 was moderately underweight, lethargic and suffering from head, neck and flipper swelling due to infected puncture wounds. Results from a radiograph exam revealed RK58 suffered a small bone fracture in his left front flipper at a puncture wound site. No other internal injuries were identified. The team also administered antibiotics and fluids to boost hydration.

“RK58 arrived at our hospital in pretty rough shape but thankfully has been responding well to initial treatments and we’re hopeful that his condition will continue to improve,” says Dr. Whoriskey. “This case is a critical reminder that people should respect posted beach signage and adhere to leash laws to ensure the safety of marine mammals as well as the health of your pet.”

This is RK58’s second time in rehabilitation at The Marine Mammal Center. He was originally admitted to Ke Kai Ola in August of 2018 as the youngest-ever patient as a result of a maternal swap and early weaning from RH58 (Rocky) on Kaua’i. Pup switches are a natural occurrence that are observed annually in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, but are less common in the Main Hawaiian Islands due to the lower density of moms and pups. He nearly doubled in body weight during his five-month rehabilitation and was successfully released back to his birthplace.

Meanwhile, Hawaiian monk seal Mele has already made impressive strides in rehabilitation since her admission for treatment due to malnutrition from Oahu two weeks ago. The young female seal responded well to deworming medication and her appetite has greatly improved. The two seals are currently being kept in separate rehabilitative pool pens until they are both stabilized enough to interact with one another.

Since 2014, the Center has rehabilitated and released 33 monk seals, most of which have been rescued from and returned to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) as part of the partnership with NOAA, utilizing resources in the NWHI to identify seals in need, rescue and rehabilitate them, and give them a second chance at life. The Center’s partnership with NOAA and other cooperating agencies is more important than ever to prevent this endangered species from becoming extinct. Approximately 30 percent of monk seals that are alive today are due to conservation efforts led by NOAA and partners like The Marine Mammal Center.

As an essential business operating during the ongoing pandemic, the Center is committed to continuing its core mission work that includes advancing the conservation of threatened and endangered species.

How The Public Can Help

RK58’s story is an important reminder that beachgoers should keep themselves and their pets a safe distance from resting monk seals. The Center strongly encourages pet owners statewide to protect native wildlife by adhering to leash laws and report monk seal sightings on Hawai’i Island to the Center’s response team at the 24-hour hotline: 808-987-0765.

On Kaua’i, call NOAA’s statewide toll-free hotline at 1-888-256-9840.

About The Marine Mammal Center

Headquartered on the site of a former Cold War missile base, The Marine Mammal Center is a global leader in marine mammal health, science and conservation, and is the largest marine mammal hospital in the world. The Center's teaching hospital and training programs operate globally, with its headquarters in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, part of the National Park Service. Expert teams from the Center travel around the world to work with emerging first responders and has itself rescued more than 24,000 marine mammals from 600 miles of its authorized rescue area of California coastline and the Big Island of Hawai'i. The 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](#).