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The Marine Mammal Center suspects blunt force trauma injuries due to ship strike the likely cause of death for humpback whale in Half Moon Bay

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – August 29, 2022) – Scientists at The Marine Mammal Center, the world's largest marine mammal hospital, suspect the humpback whale that washed ashore Sunday at Manhattan Beach in Half Moon Bay died due to injuries consistent with a ship strike. A team of experts from the Center and partners at the California Academy of Sciences performed a necropsy, or animal autopsy, on the dead whale to determine its cause of death. The Center is committed to partnering with organizations and individuals to provide data and find solutions to prevent these deaths in the future.

“This humpback whale had an extensive contusion over her right chest area, a fractured first cervical vertebra and its skull was dislocated from the spinal column,” says Dr. Pádraig Duignan, Director of Pathology at The Marine Mammal Center. “These findings, combined with overall excellent body condition, strongly implicates blunt force trauma associated with a ship strike as this whale’s cause of death.”

During Monday’s necropsy, scientists identified the humpback whale as a 49-foot adult female that was in a moderate stage of internal decomposition based on the quality of the skin, internal tissues and organs. The team also noted the whale had ample blubber and fat reserves.

While the findings of this whale necropsy are tragic, the information gathered from these whales is shared directly with the Center’s partners and helps inform policy decisions that can protect habitat areas, change shipping lane speeds that intersect migration routes and allow experts to better understand shifting food sources for marine mammals in a warming ocean.

The public can play an important role in the conservation of whales by reporting [sightings](#) to the Center’s website. To report a dead whale or whale in distress, call the Center’s rescue hotline at 415-289-SEAL (7325). All marine mammals are federally protected, and the public should not approach any whale, alive or dead.

Humpback whales frequent the California coast to feed during the summer and fall months before migrating south to their winter calving and mating grounds off the coast of Mexico.

The Center’s researchers also study the locations and behaviors of whales in San Francisco Bay so that informed decisions can be made to better protect whales. Public funding and support for this investigatory work is essential.

Scientists from The Marine Mammal Center and the California Academy of Sciences were able to collect a series of samples during the necropsy for ongoing research projects. Typically, the California Academy of Sciences archives various parts of each specimen (baleen, pelvic bones, blubber, muscle, etc.) in their scientific research collection and makes them available to scientists from around the world.

The dead whale was first reported to The Marine Mammal Center's response hotline by beachgoers on Sunday afternoon around 3pm. Due to the tide cycle this week, the team of scientists had a limited window to conduct the investigation safely at low tide. The Center received advance permission from the city of Half Moon Bay and California State Parks prior to conducting the necropsy.

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA – 2022 DEAD WHALE RESPONSE INFORMATION:

7 gray whales, 3 humpback whales

Necropsies: 1 malnutrition, 1 suspect orca predation, 4 ship strikes, 4 undetermined

March 5, 2022: adult female gray whale, Limantour Beach, Point Reyes National Seashore; cause of death: malnutrition

April 4, 2022: subadult female gray whale, Muir Beach, Golden Gate National Recreation Area; cause of death: ship strike

April 5, 2022: adult male gray whale, Alameda; cause of death: unknown, only limited samples taken and no necropsy performed

April 29, 2022: adult male gray whale, Rockaway Beach, Pacifica; cause of death: ship strike

May 13, 2022: adult female gray whale, Fort Funston, San Francisco; cause of death: ship strike

May 20, 2022: adult male gray whale, Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge, Mountain View; cause of death: unknown, only limited samples taken and no necropsy performed

June 19, 2022: adult male gray whale, Slide Ranch, Marin County, cause of death: unknown, only limited samples taken and no necropsy performed

July 14, 2022: humpback whale, North Beach, Point Reyes National Seashore, cause of death: undetermined

July 17, 2022: subadult female humpback whale, Sharp Park, Pacifica, cause of death: suspect orca predation

August 28, 2022: adult female humpback whale, Manhattan Beach, Half Moon Bay, cause of death: ship strike

BACKGROUND ON HUMPBACK WHALES:

Humpback whales are among the most endangered whales with fewer than 10 percent of their original population remaining. The current world population is estimated between 35,000 to 40,000 individuals, including 2,900 individuals that frequent the coasts of Washington, Oregon and California. Humpback whales regularly frequent the California coast to feed during the summer and fall months before migrating south to their winter calving and mating grounds off the coast of Mexico. The main threats they face in the ocean are ship strikes and entanglement in ocean trash and fishing gear.

ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER:

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. As a leading contributor to the global body of research and knowledge about marine mammal medicine and ocean health, the Center generates research findings and scientific outputs at volumes comparable to top academic institutions and prides itself on gathering and providing open research data that is free to access, reuse, repurpose and redistribute. The Center's teaching hospital and training programs operate globally with headquarters in Sausalito, CA. The Center has rescued more than 24,000 marine mammals from 600 miles of authorized rescue area along the 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](#).