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Humpback whale killed by a suspected ship strike was one of the most well-known whales in California

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – August 31, 2022) – Scientists at The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, and their partners at Happywhale, a global collection of whale sighting data, have confirmed that the humpback whale that washed ashore Sunday in Half Moon Bay was a well-known individual named Fran. The Happywhale database has [recorded 277 sightings of Fran](#) since her birth in 2005, making her the most popular whale in California. Fran was sighted most often in the Monterey Bay Area.

“The death of Fran is incredibly tragic, given that ship strikes on whales can be avoided,” says Kathi George, Director of Field Operations & Response at The Marine Mammal Center. “Everyone, including shipping companies, wants to protect these magnificent giants, and we need ships to slow down in vessel speed reduction (VSR) areas as well as when whales are around.”

Deadly ship strikes are most easily solved by ships reducing their speed in known whale habitat. NOAA issues seasonal voluntary speed reduction requests within its west coast national sanctuaries with the goal of reducing the risk of fatal ship strikes to whales, including endangered blue, fin and humpback whales. Over 60% of ships currently reduce their speed in these seasonal zones, but we need to increase that percentage and take additional measures to avoid more deaths like Fran.

“Protecting endangered species and sanctuary resources is a priority issue for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS),” says Jennifer Stock, Greater Farallones and Cordell Bank national marine sanctuaries media liaison.

“To address this issue, the Greater Farallones and Cordell Bank Sanctuary Advisory Councils formed a Joint Ship Strike Working Group to evaluate potential management options and provide feedback to the Advisory Councils on actions to reduce risk.”

The primary goal of the sanctuary ship strike work is to reduce the risk of lethal ship strikes to endangered and threatened blue, humpback, and fin whales by 50% in Greater Farallones and Cordell Bank national marine sanctuaries.

According to the Happywhale database, Fran was born in 2005 and was the daughter of [Big Fin aka River, CRC-9019](#), and was named by [Ferd Bergholz](#) in honor of his late wife. Fran often wintered in Guerrero, Mexico, and was originally documented there by Katharina Audley of the [Whales of Guerrero Research Project](#).

“Our team at Happywhale tracks individual whales in the North Pacific through automated image recognition AI to better understand and protect whales and their ocean environment,” says Ted Cheeseman, founder of [Happywhale](#), a citizen science project that identifies the world's whales. “We

know that Fran has been photographed all but one year since she was born. Learning of her death is especially sad since this year marks the first year she's successfully brought a calf to feeding grounds."

Experts at Happywhale also note that Fran was most recently seen this July in Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary with her healthy calf.

A team of experts from The Marine Mammal Center and partners at the California Academy of Sciences performed a necropsy, or animal autopsy, on Fran earlier this week to determine the cause of death. Their [findings](#) indicated blunt force trauma due to a ship strike. 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 public can play an important role in the conservation of whales by reporting whale [sightings](#) to the Center's website at MarineMammalCenter.org/whale-sighting or sharing photos of whales with Happywhale at <https://happywhale.com/submitMedia>.

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.

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.

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