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The Marine Mammal Center responds to a dead gray whale in the Marin Headlands as sightings of the species increase in San Francisco

The necropsy response with partners at the California Academy of Sciences is the first in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2025

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – April 1, 2025) Experts at The Marine Mammal Center and their partners at the California Academy of Sciences performed a necropsy, or animal autopsy, on a gray whale on Monday morning, March 31, at Black Sands Beach in Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Although the initial necropsy findings were inconclusive, the response comes as the Center’s Cetacean Conservation Biology Team reported more than a half dozen gray whale sightings in a single day in San Francisco Bay last week. Through active cetacean monitoring efforts and by investigating deaths like this, the Center and partners can identify and respond to rapidly changing environmental trends as well as human impacts on marine mammal populations.

The Center was first notified by National Park Service staff of a dead [gray whale](#) floating along the northwest side of Alcatraz Island on Saturday morning, March 29. The Center’s Cetacean and Pathology Team, in conjunction with our partners at the California Academy of Sciences, initially responded to the whale Saturday afternoon via a research boat. The team was able to collect a skin and blubber sample, take photo identification imagery, and successfully tie a buoy to the whale’s right pectoral flipper to allow for more prominent visibility with shifting tides and in advance of poor weather conditions.

After floating out underneath the Golden Gate Bridge late in the day Saturday, the Center’s team confirmed on Sunday, March 30, that the same individual whale had washed ashore at Black Sands Beach in Golden Gate National Recreation Area (Marin Headlands).

A team of a half dozen scientists from the Center and the California Academy of Sciences responded to the 36-foot whale on Monday to conduct a necropsy (animal autopsy) at low tide with permission from the National Park Service. Experts were able to identify the whale as a female and noted that the whale was in emaciated body condition. No initial evidence of blunt force trauma that would indicate a suspected vessel strike while the whale was alive was found. It’s suspected but not confirmed that it’s likely a subadult animal in terms of age class.

Diagnostic and histopathology tests on collected samples can take several weeks to fully process in attempting to determine a cause of death, which is not known at this time. Scientists from the Center and the California Academy of Sciences were able to collect a series of samples 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 thus making them available to scientists from around the world.

The Center’s Cetacean Conservation Biology Team has been actively monitoring gray whale activity with more intense focus in San Francisco Bay since the beginning of March as sightings have increased. Last

week, there was a significant uptick in whale presence in the bay with seven confirmed sightings and as many as nine total reports in a single day.

“While this number of gray whales in San Francisco Bay is exciting to see, it does raise concerns for both human and whale safety,” says Kathi George, Director of Cetacean Conservation Biology at the Center. “Gray whales are difficult to see due to their low profile and coloration patterns that naturally blend into the bay. It’s important for all boaters to be extra vigilant and whale aware.”

The Center works closely with the maritime community via the San Francisco Harbor Safety Committee and has been heartened to see a continued increase in shared communication and collaboration as it relates to whale safety in the bay.

This is the first dead whale response in the San Francisco Bay Area this year. Historical stranding data, as well as a regularly-updated interactive map of the Center’s responses from this year across our 600-mile California response range, can be found [here](#).

The team received advanced permission to conduct the necropsy investigation from the National Park Service and the carcass will remain on the beach to naturally decompose. However, there is a distinct chance that it could refloat with the incoming high tide.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) closed the [Unusual Mortality Event](#) (UME) involving stranded North Pacific gray whales along the West Coast of North America. The UME was first declared in 2019, after ecosystem changes in the whale’s Arctic feeding areas resulted in the die-off of hundreds of gray whales along the Pacific coast. The resulting four-year period saw a loss of more than 45 percent of the eastern North Pacific population. Malnutrition, killer whale predation, entanglement, and vessel strikes were documented as the main causes of death.

If you do see a whale in the bay or surrounding area, you can report the sighting and enter observations into the free [Whale Alert](#) app on your smartphone.

To report a dead, injured, or stranded marine mammal in the San Francisco Bay Area, please contact one of two hotlines:

- For dead marine mammals contact California Academy of Sciences: (415) 379 - 5381
- For live marine mammals contact The Marine Mammal Center: (415) 289 - SEAL (7325)

All marine mammal stranding activities were conducted under authorization by the National Marine Fisheries Service through a Stranding Agreement issued to the California Academy of Sciences (SA-WCR-2023-016) and MMPA/ESA Permit No. 24359.

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, California. The Center has rescued more than 26,000 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 ocean health through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education.

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