

OZZY: Skinniest seal pup local marine mammal center has ever rescued

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The Northcoast Marine Mammal Centers make many rescues along the coast each year thanks to volunteers in Del Norte and Humboldt counties.

But volunteers had never seen a harbor seal pup more in need of rescue than one found at the Mad River Beach on May 21.

“They really weren’t sure about him. He was literally a bag of bones,” said Karen Helms, executive director of the Crescent City center. “Dr. (Dennis) Wood said it was truly the skinniest harbor seal pup he’d ever seen.”

Helms said the pup, which volunteers named “Ozzy,” had been abandoned by its mother for an unknown reason. When found, Ozzy was literally starving. He suffered from malnutrition and was completely emaciated.

Medical director Wood founded the Northcoast Marine Mammal Center in 1984 and has since relied on about 40 volunteers to rescue mammals along 200 miles of coastline. Helms said spring and summer is the busy season.

Rescuing a marine mammal is a complicated process.

“When they come in, they get a full examination, blood draw, fecal test,” Helms said. “For the most part, Ozzy was just emaciated, other than a small wound on his chin he probably got rubbing on ground.”

Stabilizing Ozzy’s body temperature was the first priority, Helms said. Then the focus was to get some weight on the baby seal.

Ozzy’s diet consisted of processed food four to five times a day.

He had to be taught how to eat. Helms said fish were cut into small pieces, placed in his mouth and even partially down his throat.

“He’d shake head and try to spit it out. ‘What the heck do you want me to do with that?’” Helms said, explaining Ozzy’s reaction. “We basically had to teach him how to swallow.”

In the next phase of his education Ozzie was moved to a pool and taught to take fish while in the water. Initially, he was fed above the water line, then below, then encouraged to follow the food under water as it circulated. Eventually, Ozzy will transition from chasing pieces to gobbling whole fish.

“It takes several weeks’ time. It can be anywhere from one to two weeks to a month long,” Helms said.

Once Ozzy is given a clean bill of health and gets closer to the 50-pound ideal weight of a harbor seal pup he will be released back to the wild.

“He’s about 25 pound now,” Helms said. “But he’s getting chubbier and healthier. He’s doing well.”

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing protocols limit the number of rescues in-house. Helms said typically they care for as many as 25 rescues at one time. Right now, there are only seven in the Crescent City facility.

However, the center’s gift shop just got the green light to reopen last week. Hours are Thursday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and face masks are required.

With Ozzy’s recovery well on its way, Helms reminds the public not to disturb marine mammals in distress, but to leave rescue to experts and call the center’s hotline number: 707-951-4722.

“Never approach one and never try to push one back in the water,” she said. “Whether it’s a dolphin or whale, seal or sea lion, that’s about the worst thing you can do.”

As a nonprofit, Helms said the Northcoast Marine Mammal Centers operates on donations, and like most nonprofits during the pandemic, donations are down across the board. She said anyone interested can make a

donation on center's webpage at <https://northcoastmmc.org> or at the gift shop, 424 Howe Drive in Crescent City.