

Gray whale washes ashore near Brookings

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A 34-foot dead gray whale washed up onto Whaleshead Beach near Brookings over the holiday weekend.

Jim Rice, program manager with the Marine Mammal Institute of Oregon State University, said several bite wounds he found on the carcass indicate the juvenile male may have died from an orca attack — killer whales.

Rice said this is the second whale to float ashore on the Oregon Coast this year and is pretty much typical according to the state average. He said gray whales often get stranded in Oregon during the month of May because they are migrating northward from their breeding grounds near the coast of Baja California in Mexico.

“I was remarking to some colleagues on Friday that I was almost expecting a gray whale to strand over the holiday weekend,” said Rice. “We could very well have other strandings occurring in the next few weeks or month.”

What is troubling though, is the recent death comes amid an unusual mortality event for gray whales, which began in 2019.

Four dead gray whales washed up onto beaches in the San Francisco Bay in a span of eight days last month, according to news reports.

What's more, gray whales migrating along the West Coast have dropped 24% since 2016. A new population assessment puts the species at 20,580 whales, according to a recent report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

While this event is unusual, scientists believe the recent mortality jump will have no effect on the long-term population. In the report, NOAA scientists said it resembles a similar event that occurred in 1999-2000, and they estimate gray whale numbers will rebound as they did after the previous die-off.

Rice said the whale corpse on Whaleshead Beach is in a "moderate state of decomposition," meaning, it was probably dead for a couple of days before it arrived on shore. Rice and volunteers collected tissue samples from the corpse for further scientific research.

However, Rice stressed it is a federal crime for the general public to take any part of the whale, which is a protected species.

"If somebody wanted to collect some baleen...from the mouth of the whale thinking it would make a nice souvenir...they would be in violation of federal law," said Rice. "It's best to just look, and take pictures if you wish, but to leave it be."

While the means of disposal for the corpse is a decision to be made by state park officials, Rice thinks they will let it decompose naturally on the beach. He said it would be both costly, and harmful to the ecosystem to bury it under the sand.

"Frankly, it's part of nature. It's going to serve to feed any number of scavenging birds and other forms of wildlife that actually depend on carcasses to survive," said Rice.