



WildTimes

Winter 2022

Dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of Southern California's sick, injured and orphaned wildlife

Whale, Whale, Whale, Look Who We Have Here

By KC Scofield, Stranding Coordinator

When walking along the shoreline here in Malibu it is not uncommon to see large Gray Whales feeding in the shallows, charismatic Bottlenose Dolphins playing in the surf, and even a breaching Humpback Whale out in the distance! Large mega-pods of Long and Short Beaked Common Dolphins can frequently be seen from the top of the Point Dume cliff, and Pygmy and Dwarf Sperm Whales thrive in our deeper waters offshore. The Malibu coastline provides a unique habitat to marine mammals both living in the area and just passing through.



Common Dolphin in the Wild.

Typically, the Marine Mammal department at California Wildlife Center is known for the loud cackles of chatty Elephant Seals or the splish-splashing of playful Sea Lions. While we are most often called to help pinnipeds (seals, sea lions) in need of help, our team also responds to a variety of cetaceans (whales and dolphins) every season.

While many species of cetacean strandings are unpredictable, every year like clockwork between November and March we receive calls about Gray Whales. In the fall they migrate south to their breeding grounds in Baja California, Mexico, and in the spring they make the journey north to their summer feeding grounds in the North Pacific (the Bering Sea down to Northern California). This migration "highway" takes them right past Malibu. Many of the reports we receive are not of beached Gray Whales but of those that look "like they are trying to come on shore." As a coastal species, you can frequently see them feeding in the shallows at Point Dume and Westward beaches. With benthic prey such as shrimp-like amphipods, being their favorite snack, Gray Whales are often seen in very shallow waters rolling on their side, swimming slowly, scooping up sediment, and leaving a trail of mud in their wake. To many, this may look like an animal in distress "trying to come on shore" and in need of help.



Risso Dolphin

The Marine Mammal team responds to all reports that come in, this includes whales and dolphins on shore or in the water. When animals are in the water it provides our team an educational opportunity to share the life history of these local species. We share information like how Gray Whales feed, why dolphins like to surf the waves, and the migratory patterns of Humpback Whales.



Mouth of Gray Whale

On rare occasions a cetacean may meet the criteria for rescue. If so, the team works together to get the animal off the beach as quickly and safely as possible. On average CWC rescues eight individuals a year. While that may not sound like a lot, these animals require specialized equipment, particular protocols, and quite a few team members since they can be HEAVY (sometimes over 1,000 pounds). So far in 2022 we have responded to two Pygmy Sperm Whales, two Bottlenose Dolphins, one Northern Right Whale Dolphin, and we expect to receive more calls this winter. Other species we have responded to in the past have been, Gray Whales, Risso's Dolphins, Humpback Whales, Long and Short Beaked Common Dolphins, Striped Dolphins and even a Fin Whale. *(continued on page 2)*

Inside:

Think Twice About Those Traps, Domoic Acid, A Thank You Note..

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(continued from page 1)

While CWC does not rehabilitate cetaceans on site, we work closely with our network partners to facilitate the stabilization, transportation, and continued care of individuals.

With so many cetaceans in our waters it is not uncommon for one to strand. If you see a stranded whale or dolphin, please do not push them back in the water. Give the animal space and call the Marine Mammal Team at California Wildlife Center or your local marine mammal rescue agency.

Think Twice About Those Traps

By Denys Hemen, Hospital Manager

There are dozens of home pest control items available for purchase today at various home improvement retailers. From sprays to traps to zappers, humans have developed many creative ways to keep unwanted insects and rodents out of our homes. It is understandable for people to strive to keep the inside of homes free of unwanted creatures. Unfortunately, when these products move from indoor pest control isles to the outdoor gardening section in retail settings, this becomes a misguided and irresponsible action. Native and beneficial wildlife often become the unintended victims of these products. The worst items to place outdoors are poisons, glue traps, and snap traps.

When poisons are moved outside of the home, the number of non-target species that are affected increases exponentially. Poisoning rats and mice outside may lead to predator species like coyotes, bobcats, and raptors eating these sick and debilitated rodents that are easy to catch. Many health problems may arise, such as raptors losing the clotting ability of their blood and damage to the immune systems of coyotes and bobcats which may lead to severe break outs of mange. Such problems are seen inside of the hospital at CWC many times a year.

Glue traps, including sticky fly traps, used outside of the home draw in even more non-targeted animals. Sticky traps are a double whammy because the target species gets trapped in the goo and predators will go after it, entangling themselves in the sticky mess. The intention of the glue trap is to keep prey in place so that they slowly die of dehydration and starvation. Also, animals may accidentally get stuck while going about their natural ground or arial foraging routines. We have seen all types of animals stuck in these traps. Snakes, ground dwelling birds like towhees and wrens, mockingbirds, warblers, desert cottontails, and many other species have passed through the doors of our exam room with feathers, scales, or fur entangled in a sticky trap.

A very wide variety of domestic and wild animals are harmed by snap traps left outside. A rat snap trap has the potential to cause great injury to a curious cat or dog that may sniff around the bait. Wild animals fare even worse. Just last month we received an American Crow that had its beak shattered by a snap trap as well as a Barn Owl with a trap on its leg. Unfortunately, neither patient survived their injuries. An earlier snap trap victim, a Striped Skunk, was able to be treated and released with 51 days of medical care after getting his foot caught in a rat snap trap.



Coyote pup with mange

Please help protect our wild friends and never place poisons or traps outside of your home. We cannot prevent nuisance animals from passing through, but we can prevent them from wanting to stay and hang out! Some straightforward ways to keep unwanted rodents from chilling out in your yard or patio are to never leave fallen fruit from trees on the ground, bring cat or dog food inside, and keep all trash receptacles closed. If you ever find an animal stuck in a glue trap, do not try to remove them. For snap traps, if you can safely remove the trap without fear of the animal attacking you then do so. For suspect poisonings, as well as animals caught in glue traps and snap traps, contain the animal and trap in a box if you can do so without fear of the animal harming you. If you are fearful of the animal, call your local animal shelter for assistance. Call CWC immediately for assistance after containment in all instances.



Bewick's Wren on fly trap

Domoic Acid

By Dr. Guthrum Purdin, DVM, Wildlife Veterinarian

In mid-August, California Wildlife Center rescued a sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*) that had been spotted frothing at the mouth and stuporous. After capture and during transport, full seizures developed. Just a few days later, another sea lion was rescued – this one was weaving their neck and head in a serpentine motion, alternating with what's called "stargazing" where the head points upward and back, blindly directed toward the sky. Sadly, this was the beginning of a trend, one that would reach up and down the Pacific coast.

The culprit was a "harmful algal bloom" (HAB) where a type of diatom, an algal plankton called *Pseudo-nitzschia australis*, reproduces in massive numbers and produces a toxin called domoic acid (DA). The diatoms are eaten by shellfish and other tiny grazers who are themselves eaten by larger predators. At each step in the food chain, the toxin is concentrated in the animal's tissues. During one of these HABs, sardines & anchovies, tasty meals for hungry sea lions, may become heavily contaminated with DA, a neurotoxin that can be fatal to marine mammals. Fish eating marine birds, like pelicans and loons, can be likewise affected. Among other properties, DA mimics a certain neurotransmitter called glutamate, activating cells in the nervous system that then can't be switched off. It also causes calcium to flood into certain cells in the brain, especially the hippocampus and amygdala. Humans exposed to DA may develop Amnesiac Shellfish Poisoning. In animals, the brain, the kidneys, and the heart can be damaged. There is no antidote to this toxin and treatment is supportive: primarily controlling the seizures and providing fluids. Providing good healthy, DA-free food is another key component to treatment.



Sea lion suffering from DA poisoning, "stargazing"

Problems may persist even after treatment if permanent brain damage occurs. People can have deficits in short-term memory and mood swings. Recovered sea lions have sometimes been found confused, wandering miles away from the ocean.

Way back in 1961, open ocean birds called Sooty Shearwaters appeared at Capitola near Santa Cruz, crashing into people and windows. No one knew what was causing this bizarre behavior and the upsetting event inspired Alfred Hitchcock's classic horror film "The Birds". HABs were rare then, but researchers now believe this was an early appearance of DA. Blooms of *Pseudo-nitzschia* and other toxic plankton are increasing in frequency as ocean temperatures rise. Nutrient runoff from agriculture can further compound the problem.

There are several monitoring stations up and down the coast that keep tabs on concentrations of *Pseudo-nitzschia* in seawater with the intent of detecting an incipient HAB before it becomes a problem for humans who consume fish and shellfish. Likewise, sea surface temperature is regularly evaluated. In 1987 hundreds of people became ill and three died after consuming DA-contaminated shellfish at Prince Edward Island in Canada. Such large outbreaks have become rare thanks to environmental monitoring. Unfortunately for marine mammals and birds, the vast ocean that is their home and larder can also be a trap when their only food sources become contaminated with toxins like DA.

For now, this year's harmful algal bloom has passed, and rescue calls have tapered off dramatically. If you see a stranded sea lion on the beach, especially if you suspect something like DA, do not approach the animal. These are wild animals and may behave in unexpected ways. This is especially true with DA, which can cause permanent neurological damage. DA animals can be hyperexcitable and, if they feel threatened, can be very aggressive. So stay back, at least 50ft or more, and notify your local animal control agencies, lifeguards, or a marine mammal rescue organization. Report any unusual behaviors and response teams can evaluate whether the animal is in distress or merely taking a nap after a long day at sea.

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Thank you!

By Jennifer Brent, Executive Director

As we head into winter and say good-bye to 2022, I'd like to take a moment to thank you for supporting our work. The last two years have been exceptionally difficult for us as well as for many of you. However, 2022 also brought a return to CWC of our valuable volunteers, many of whom were on hiatus during the peak of the pandemic. We have nearly 200 people who give their time to help the animals and donate over 25,000 hours annually.

And we definitely needed them! In the past 12 months we have received over 4,100 animals in peril. Whether suffering from rodenticide poisoning, trapped in a glue trap, struck by a car, flown into a window, pet caught or orphaned, we have seen a wide range of reasons for intake. It's important to note that the vast majority of animals that we see are here as a result of humans. Birds don't fly into trees, but they perceive glass as clear and certainly fly into windows at full force. Foxes don't run into cars, but when roads are built where animals traditionally crossed for ages, they're struck by tons of speeding metal.

That's why we especially appreciate you! The enlightened supporters who recognize that these animals are worth saving! While other people see a hurt bird and say, "oh, it's just another dove" you say "I can help that bird!" You drive from Lancaster to bring us a baby squirrel that fell from a tree or from Downey with a Band-tailed pigeon. You read our social media posts and ask us how YOU can take action and rid your neighborhood of the ominous black poison traps. You slow down to allow a skunk to cross and you use bird tape to save lives.

Thank you for every step you take to make a difference for animals.