



Despite my privileged upbringing, I'm actually quite well-balanced ...



STRANDINGS on the Seven Mile Beach NOT UNUSUAL

By Sandi Schwartz

Seal stranded in Avalon shown here recuperating at the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine.

It is quite common during the late winter and early spring for seals to be found resting on the beach along the Jersey Shore. This is the result of seals giving birth off the coast of Massachusetts, and then nor'easter storms throughout the winter causing some of them to be swept off the beach. The seals then swim until they reach land, often ending up along the coast of New Jersey. With the seal population exploding, it is no surprise that more of them are being found in New Jersey about 100 seals have been found so far this year.

When marine mammals (such as seals, dolphins, whales) or sea turtles are found on the beach either alive or dead, it is called a "stranding." Sometimes the animal is just resting on the beach, but other times it could be injured due to a number of factors such as shark bites, parasites, respiratory problems, net entanglement, a vessel strike, toxic pollution or from swallowing plastics.

One such visitor was found on the beach in Avalon at 9th Street around 8 a.m. April 16. The 44 pound male gray seal was spotted by a police officer. The seal was resting about 10 feet from the edge of the water after some thunderstorms came through the area. It spent the morning yawning and relaxing on the Avalon beachfront. Although the seal appeared to be in good health and had no visible signs of trauma, it did have a broken jaw and a two-inch-long injury on its right rear flipper.

Scott Wahl, Avalon's public information officer, was at the scene shortly after the seal was found.

"I've dealt with some seals before, gotten close to them, etc., and it looked like it was happy," he explained. "I walked up to the seal slowly, and he really looked like a playful pup. He was rolling around in the sand, yawning a few times, looking like he was just taking a break from a swim. He flapped his flipper a couple of times and seemed very comfortable. He seemed perfectly happy and content with no visible sign of injury. I was a little surprised that he had a jaw injury because he was yawning and his mouth looked fine."

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The seal was taken to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center (MMSC) in Brigantine the only organization in New Jersey allowed to handle stranded marine mammals. Since it was founded in 1978, MMSC has responded to over 3600 calls for stranded whales, dolphins, seals and sea turtles of all types and sizes.

The animals are brought to MMSC for rehabilitation and eventual release. Rehabilitation can last up to several months and cost thousands of dollars for each animal. Once an animal is secured at the center, the staff assesses and treats it for dehydration and any injuries. Blood is then drawn and sent to a lab for analysis. Depending on the results, medication is administered by the staff. The animals are cleaned and fed several small meals a day of fresh, food-grade fish and vitamins. They are mostly left alone and monitored via cameras set up over their pens. It is the center's policy to not domesticate the animals to ensure that they can return to the wild successfully without being dependent on humans.

Once healed, an animal is released back into the ocean. A satellite tag tracking device is sometimes attached to a seal to identify where it originally came from since they tend to travel back to their birthplace. In addition, all seals are tagged on their flippers before they are released to track their whereabouts. Occasionally, when a seal is stranded in late spring and the rehabilitation process lasts into the summer, the animal is taken north to Rhode Island or other areas to be released where the water is colder. Otherwise, the animals are released into the back bay areas around Brigantine.

According to Robert Schoelkopf, director and spokesperson for MMSC, the seal found in Avalon is doing well and its injury is slowly healing. Once it

is completely healed it will be returned to the ocean. Schoelkopf explained that the center will post updated information on its website about the seal, including a new photograph and updated weight information.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND A STRANDED MARINE MAMMAL

In the United States it is illegal for anyone without a scientific permit to handle a marine mammal. If you see a marine mammal on the beach, be sure to follow these steps:

- Immediately call the Marine Mammal Stranding Center at (609) 266-0538, the local station of the U.S Coast Guard, or the police. MMSC is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Never touch the animal unless you are given specific instructions to do so by the MMSC. Although seals appear to be harmless, they have sharp teeth and claws and can inflict a bad bite. Additionally, they often carry viruses that can be transmitted to humans.
- Keep your dogs away. If they are bitten by a seal they can get a serious infection as well.
- Only MMSC staff should capture or remove a marine mammal.
- Stay at least 100 feet away from the animal to prevent it from being prematurely chased back into the water before MMSC staff arrives.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Seals can be adopted by the public for \$25 once the animal is released. Adoption money helps pay for food, medicine, and transportation costs. Seals typically eat 9 pounds of food per day at a cost of 50 cents per pound, which adds up quickly. Each Adopt-a-Seal package includes a certificate with the person's name and a photograph of the adopted seal, along with a history of the animal.

In addition, the public can visit the center on the weekends and view the animals by closed circuit television. There are also several volunteer opportunities available at the MMSC. Visit www.marinemammalstrandingcenter.org for more information.

Sandi Schwartz is a Member of the National Association of Science Writers & D.C. Science Writers Association and occasionally writes on issues pertaining to science and weather for the Seven Mile Times and Sea Isle Times.

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