

## Humpback's death still a mystery

By **DINAH VOYLES PULVER**

Environment Writer

DAYTONA BEACH SHORES -- Standing knee-deep in a pool of whale blood, the petite, strawberry blonde biologist shook her head.

No matter how many endangered animals Ann Spellman has helped cut up and examine in 22 years on Florida's East Coast, it's always a tough job.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologist was one member of a team that arrived in Daytona Beach Shores on Thursday to examine a dead humpback whale. The 35-foot-long juvenile male washed ashore near the Sunglow Pier on Wednesday night, quickly attracting a crowd.

It was the second humpback to wash up on the state's East Coast in five days. The other was in Cocoa Beach on Saturday. It has been a week of bad news for endangered whales in Florida.

On Monday, an aerial survey team spotted a right whale off the coast of Brunswick, Ga., with its head tangled in a rope.

"The rope is bridled over its head and trails back behind the whale 20 or 30 more feet," said Blair Mase, the southeastern region stranding coordinator for the National Marine Fisheries Service. A team sent out to look at the whale was able to attach a tracking buoy, which the service is using to keep tabs on the whale with the hope of removing the rope.

In the one bit of positive news, Nemo, a whale seen tangled in fishing gear off the Volusia coast last year, was spotted this week free of any dangling lines, Mase said.

Meanwhile, in the Shores on Thursday, curiosity seekers crowded in to see the dead humpback. Many lined the pier to watch as biologists from the commission and the Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute, wearing waders and gloves, cut open the whale to retrieve its heart, liver and stomachs.

A trained team from Volusia County Environmental Management helped wrestle the decaying whale while enduring cold winds and an overpowering smell. It was the third time the crew has helped with a dead humpback on the county's shoreline in the past four years, said Kelli McGee, the department's director of natural resources.

While watching several researchers kneeling inside the whale, county Beach Patrol officers said they found it hard to imagine just how big a full-grown humpback would be. The young whale was still perhaps 5 to 13 feet shorter than a full-grown male.



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Surfers head for a surfing spot near a 35-foot humpback whale that washed ashore Thursday morning.

The fisheries service hopes the exam will reveal not only what killed this whale, but also help biologists figure out why other endangered humpbacks have been dying off the northeastern U.S. coast. Nearly 30 humpbacks have died in the Atlantic in the past 12 months. Mase said most were found floating 20 or 30 miles offshore and could not be examined.

"The fear was that once the whales started migrating south, we might start finding them dead along the coast," she said. The whales migrate to the Caribbean each winter to breed and to calve.

It will be weeks before the information from the Shores' whale can be analyzed, said commission biologist Alex Costidis, who led Thursday's necropsy. Much of the tissue was too decomposed to be very helpful, but they will at least be able to study the samples to look for biotoxins, he said.

Although scientists may never know exactly what killed the humpback, they do know this whale also had been tangled in some type of rope or line at some point because its tail and jaws were scarred.

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