



Never Happened Before: Region Averaging One Dead Whale a Week Since Early August

Written By: Vanessa Palange on September 21, 2018 11:34 a.m.



Two humpback whales washed up on New England shores Friday.

One is a carcass that washed up two weeks ago, but another appears to be a new whale.

Tony LaCasse, media relations director at the New England Aquarium, told NH1.com on Friday that a team is on its way to Little Brewster Island where Boston Harbor Lighthouse is to examine a humpback that washed ashore there.

LaCasse said he isn't sure how large the whale is but it was spotted floating offshore a few days ago.

The whale and other marine life die off this summer has prompted concern.

“We are in unprecedented territory. NOAA has declared a UME (unusual mortality event) on three large whale species in this region,” LaCasse said. “To our knowledge, this has never happened before.”

The whale that washed up in Revere, Massachusetts, is a juvenile humpback that is about 35-feet-long.

It first was spotted by a whale watch group out of Cape Ann about 2 miles out to sea near Gloucester, Massachusetts on Sept. 7.

Lacasse said the young whale is the 2016 calf of a well-known humpback named Venom.

Over the next 40 hours, the carcass traveled 25 miles where it washed up in Cohasset, Massachusetts, on Sept. 9.

“That’s a pretty impressive distance,” LaCasse said.

Teams from the aquarium and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have already collected samples on that whale but can’t complete a full necropsy because of the condition.

LaCasse said when it washed up in Cohasset it had been caught in heavy surf that tore up the body. After they took samples, the town coordinated with NOAA and the Environmental Protection Agency to tow the whale out to sea.

LaCasse said a whale washing ashore twice is unusual.

“It doesn’t happen often,” he said. “We’ve had a few situations. There was a finback whale that washed up on a remote Boston island and then washed up again in Rockport on Cape Ann.”

Before the whale washed ashore officials investigated a large clam die-off.

The Boston Globe reported that hundreds of thousands of Atlantic surf clams washed up on Revere Beach this week. The state Department of Conservation and Recreation says the die-off is the third event of its kind this summer.

The Division of Marine Fisheries will analyze the clams in an attempt to determine the cause of the mass shellfish kill.

Save the Harbor/Save the Bay spokesman Bruce Berman believes shellfish die-off have increased as a result of climate change. Berman says a certain type of algae

that clogs the gills of clams could also be responsible for the kills.

On Monday, a dead minke whale washed up on a beach in Rye. The removal of the whale went viral when Jason Scheiber, a correspondent for the New Hampshire Union Leader, posted video to Twitter showing workers trying to fit the 16-foot whale in a too-small dumpster so they could transport it for a necropsy. The whale flops to the ground in the video.

A bigger container was later found and the whale was moved to the compost facility so researchers could determine how it died. LaCasse said the aquarium helped with the necropsy in that case.

LaCasse said the Greater Massachusetts area has averaged one dead whale a week since the beginning of August. Many of these have been minke and humpback whales because they feed on small schooling fish in our region.

“Both have really exceptional mortality rates,” he said.

But there have been other species like finbacks as well as seals.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Friday an outbreak of distemper is to blame for a rash of seal deaths in Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts.

The agency said avian flu also was suspected based on early results but new test results do not point to it as a major cause.

More than 660 dead seals have washed ashore along the coastline in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts since July. There’s no danger to humans because the virus that causes distemper in seals is not contagious, but the virus can affect pets.