

Unexplained dolphin strandings continue in Mass.

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Katie Moore, an International Fund for Animal Welfare rescue team member, approaches a portion of a pod of 11 dolphins stranded on a mud flat during low tide in Wellfleet, Mass., Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2012. Ten of the dolphins were saved and one perished during the event. There have been 177 dolphins stranded in the area since Jan. 12, 2012 and 53 have been successfully released. (AP Photo/Stephan Savoia)

(AP) -- There's no good spot on Cape Cod for dolphins to continue this winter's massive and unexplained beachings, but a group of 11 has chosen one of the worst.

The remote inlet down Wellfleet's Herring River is a place where the tides recede fast and far, and that's left the animals mired in a grayish-brown mud one local calls "Wellfleet mayonnaise."

Walking is the only way to reach the animals, but it's not easy. Rescuers crunch through cord grass and seashells before hitting a grabby muck that releases a footstep only after a sucking pop. One volunteer hits a thigh-deep "hole" and tumbles forward. The mud covers his face like messy war paint the rest of the morning.

Rescuers make a quick assessment once they reach the animals.

One dolphin is dead, but the other 10 appear healthy, and some bang their tails in the shallows, struggling to move. Rescuers decide the best course is to wait for the incoming tide to free the dolphins, then boats can try to herd them out of trouble. The only other alternative is hauling them to a waiting trailer, and [open water](#). But the trailer is nearly a mile away.

Waiting has risks. Dolphins can't survive long on land and there's no guarantee the boats can push the dolphins on to safety.

"Now's where we start crossing our fingers," said Brian Sharpe of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, as he heads for a boat.

A year ago, Wednesday's 11 stranded dolphins would have seemed remarkable. Now, they just add to a growing tally.

In the last month, 177 short-beaked common dolphins have stranded on Cape Cod, and 124 have died. The total is nearly five times the average of 37 common dolphins that have stranded annually during the last 12 years.

So far, there's no explanation.

Workers at the IFAW, which has led the rescue efforts, tag and take [blood samples](#) of the stranded animals, necropsies have been done on

dead dolphins and a Congressional briefing was held early this month in the push for answers. But researchers can offer only theories about things such as changes in weather, water temperature or behavior of the dolphins' prey.

Geography may also play a role, if the dolphins are getting lost along the Cape's jagged inner coastline, in towns like Wellfleet.

In mid-February, Wellfleet feels like a place long emptied out after a dimly-remembered party. A closed mini-golf course, candy store and drive-in theater are among the dormant summer businesses seen on a drive into town. A downtown road rolls past shuttered cottages and motel cabins.

But Wellfleet is a hot spot for the dolphin strandings, in part because of features such as Jeremy Point, a thin peninsula that blocks the way to [Cape Cod](#) Bay if the dolphins wander too far into the town's harbor. The IFAW boat is charged with pushing the animals past the point Wednesday, once they're freed.

Meanwhile, rescuers in orange vests and black waders work in pairs to move the dolphins on slings, bringing them closer together and pointed the right way.

"We'll take advantage of the fact that they're social animals," said Kerry Branon, an IFAW spokeswoman. "We're hoping if we release them together, they'll stick together and then we'll herd them out around the point."

Not all the dolphins are on board, though. One drifts off to the left, where he could beach again. The manager of the stranding team, Katie Moore, slides over, grabs its dorsal fin, and gives it a push in the right direction.

"You're going the wrong way, buddy," she says.

The inlet continues to fill and the dolphins break into waters that are deeper than the [rescuers](#) can follow, but they're in two groups. The IFAW's boat eventually follows one pod and the Wellfleet harbormaster takes another. The noise from the motors pushes the dolphins ahead. So do acoustic pingers, devices that make a sound that annoys the dolphins.

From here, all the shore workers can do is await word from the boats, which will follow the dolphins until dark, if needed. The crew trudges off the beach and gathers later in a parking lot at the Wellfleet marina, where coffee and two boxes of doughnut holes will be served.

Volunteer Mike Giblin, muck still on his face, sits in his truck and explains why, at 64, he can't wait to get an early-morning call to help the dolphins. The animals are special, says the retired high school teacher. He adds that the dolphins somehow know the workers are there to help. He's certain.

Moore later smiles at the thought, but dismisses any mystical link with the animals.

"They're wild animals," she says. "This is not comforting for them. They don't want to be touched."

The day's gray cold has soaked through Moore and she's worn out. Help for her team is coming from different places; some workers from a Virginia aquarium assisted Wednesday. But she says the pace of the strandings has been exhausting.

"We just don't know when it's going to end anymore," she said. "That wears on people."

She's been encouraged by IFAW's success so far in getting dolphins back to sea. She also believes in the work.

"I think that as humans we have such a huge impact on the ocean environment and on these animals in other ways, that this is our opportunity to do the right thing."

As Moore speaks, her eyes flicker out to the harbor, where she can see the harbormaster's boat has led its group of dolphins to sea. But her agency's boat is still out, and she wonders if those dolphins will make it, or simply beach again. She wonders if she'll soon be second-guessing her decision to let the tide try to free the [dolphins](#), rather than her workers.

But it's too soon for answers.

"Ask me tomorrow how I feel about that decision," she said.

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