

# Endangered seals start journey home after rehab

April 15 2016, by By Caleb Jones

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In this Sept. 8, 2015 photo released by The Marine Mammal Center, Kilo, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal, rests after being rescued and admitted to the Marine Mammal Center's Big Island seal hospital in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Seven seals were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at the marine hospital in Hawaii. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu Thursday, April 14, 2016 for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (Julie Steelman /The Marine Mammal Center via AP)

A U.S. Coast Guard airplane rumbled down an airstrip on Hawaii's Big Island, carrying hundreds of pounds of rare and precious cargo: seven endangered Hawaiian monk seals.

Federal officials found most of the young animals malnourished late last year in the uninhabited Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the northernmost islands and atolls in the Hawaiian Islands chain.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration brought the seals to the nonprofit Marine Mammal Center on the Big Island, which nursed them back to health.

Now rehabilitated, they have started their journey home.

The Coast Guard loaded the seals on a HC-130 Hercules plane Thursday and flew them to Honolulu. The Associated Press was on the flight.

The animals will stay in a NOAA facility on Oahu until they embark on a roughly weeklong journey by boat back to their home islands. One will return to the privately owned island of Niihau.

Monk seals number only about 1,200 worldwide, and they all live in the main or Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, federal officials said.

Fewer than one in five survive their first year in the uninhabited islands because of threats including predation, entanglement and environmental changes, according to the California-based Marine Mammal Center.



In this Feb. 1, 2016 photo released by The Marine Mammal Center, Mo'o, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal, participates in rehab after being rescued and admitted to the Marine Mammal Center's Big Island seal hospital in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Seven seals were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at the marine hospital in Hawaii. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu Thursday, April 14, 2016 for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (Julie Steelman /The Marine Mammal Center via AP)

All those being transported Thursday were female, said Michelle Barbieri, a NOAA veterinarian with the Monk Seal Research Program who was aboard the flight.

"We focus our efforts on female seals because they're going to grow up and contribute to the population in the future," Barbieri said.

While in rehabilitation, the seals were nursed to a healthy weight to help increase their odds of survival. They also were taught to catch and eat fish naturally, with little human intervention, so they can hunt for themselves when they return to the wild.



In this Oct. 1, 2015 photo, Puka, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal, rests after being rescued and admitted to the Marine Mammal Center's Big Island seal hospital in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Seven seals were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at the marine hospital. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu Thursday, April 14, 2016 for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (The Marine Mammal Center, Julie Steelman via AP)

Eric Roberts, a Coast Guard marine mammal response coordinator,

helped bring the pups to the hospital when they were found and was there to escort them home.

"At the Coast Guard, we pride ourselves on being lifesavers, and this is a unique opportunity where we can actually contribute to saving a species," Roberts said.

The Marine Mammal Center has successfully released eight seals so far, but this group is its biggest recovery and release effort to date.



In this March 21, 2016. photo, Puka, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal, rests after being treated at the Marine Mammal Center's Big Island seal hospital in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Seven seals were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at the marine hospital. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu Thursday, April 14, 2016 for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (The Marine Mammal Center, Julie Steelman



via AP)

Rescuers normally transport only one or two seals at a time, making Thursday's effort "historic" and a major boost for the overall population in generations to come, said David Scholfield, a NOAA response coordinator for the Pacific Islands.

The monk seal population is declining by about 4 percent per year. Returning these animals to their home islands could have a big impact, he said.

"These seven animals would have died," Scholfield said. "So getting them back to health and having them potentially reproduce in the wild, and produce offspring, has a many magnitude effect" on the overall population.



An endangered Hawaiian monk seal looks out from her container as she is transported from Hawaii's Big Island to Honolulu, Thursday, April 14, 2016, in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Seven seal were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at a marine mammal hospital on the Big Island. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu Thursday for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



Michelle Barbieri, right, a veterinarian with NOAA's Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program, stands in the cockpit of a U.S. Coast Guard HC-130 Hercules aircraft as she and a team of officials fly from Honolulu to Hawaii's Big Island to pick up several endangered monk seals, Thursday, April 14, 2016. Seven seals were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at a marine mammal hospital on the Big Island. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu Thursday for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



A Coast Guard HC-130 Hercules is prepared for takeoff, Thursday April 14, 2016 in Honolulu. Seven endangered Hawaiian monk seals that were found abandoned or malnourished late last year began their trip back to their remote island homes Thursday after being rescued and rehabilitated. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found most of the seal pups on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the northernmost islands and atolls in the Hawaiian Islands chain. The nonprofit Marine Mammal Center's monk seal hospital on Hawaii's Big Island then nursed the animals back to health. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)





An endangered Hawaiian monk seal looks out from her container as she is transported from Hawaii's Big Island to Honolulu, Thursday, April 14, 2016, in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Seven seal were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at a marine mammal hospital on the Big Island. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back to Honolulu on Thursday for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



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Kevin Deininger, a United States Coast Guard loadmaster, smiles at one of seven endangered Hawaiian monk seals that were being transported from Hawaii's Big Island to Honolulu, Thursday, April 14, 2016 in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. The seven seal pups were found either abandoned or malnourished and were rescued by federal officials and then rehabilitated at a marine mammal hospital on the Big Island. The Coast Guard picked them up and flew them back Honolulu Thursday for the first leg of their trip back to their native Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

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