

Georgia beachgoers help pilot whales from stranding on shore

July 17 2019, by Russ Bynum



Georgia Department of Natural Resources personnel and beachgoers struggle to keep a short-fin pilot whale from crashing into the seawall on St. Simons Island, Ga., Tuesday, July 16, 2019. Dozens of pilot whales beached themselves on a Georgia shore and most were rescued by authorities and onlookers who pulled the animals further into the water. (Bobby Haven /The Brunswick News via AP)

A summer afternoon at the beach quickly became a scramble to save a pod of disoriented pilot whales, with vacationers joining lifeguards and state wildlife crews in the water trying to keep roughly 30 of the large marine mammals from beaching themselves on the Georgia coast.

Officials were hopeful they had saved most of the short-fin [pilot whales](#) that swam perilously close to shore Tuesday on St. Simons Island, about 70 miles (112 kilometers) south of Savannah.

Harbor pilots spotted a large group of [whales](#) in the nearby shipping channel Wednesday morning, said Clay George, a wildlife biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. He was waiting to learn if they followed the tide back out to sea.

"You're talking about animals that should be living 100 miles (160 kilometers) offshore," George said. "So something went wrong with these animals. They shouldn't be in a situation where they can feel sand beneath them."

Pilot whales are members of the dolphin family that can grow up to 20 feet (6 meters) long and weigh as much as 3 tons (2.7 metric tons). Pilot whales are often involved in mass strandings partly due to their [social nature](#), according to the American Cetacean Society.

Three whales died on the beach in Georgia, one of which was euthanized by officials. George said necropsies were planned to determine if the whales were sick and look for other clues to why they may have come ashore.



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Video posted online showed beachgoers and lifeguards splashing water onto whales near the shore and in some cases trying to push them away from the beach. George said most of the whales came within 50 feet (15 meters) of shore, and several tried to [beach](#) themselves repeatedly.

"That's a spooky situation because most of those animals are probably healthy and just followed others to the shore," George said. "Most of them luckily remained in shallow water. If they had beached themselves,

they probably would have all ended up dead."

The surviving whales remained offshore Wednesday afternoon, Georgia DNR spokesman Rick Lavender said. He said the agency and conservationists from the National Marine Mammal Foundation were following the pod by boat in hopes of keeping it from turning back toward land.

A helicopter searched by air Wednesday for more stranded whales and found none, Lavender said.



People on the St. Simons pier watch as Georgia Department of Natural Resources personnel and beachgoers struggle to keep a short-fin pilot whale from crashing into the seawall on St. Simons Island, Ga., Tuesday, July 16, 2019.

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Pilot whales have been known to strand themselves multiple times over an extended period. In July 2002, roughly 60 [pilot](#) whales died or were euthanized on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and nearby beaches. Whales stranded themselves in three waves over two days.

Pilot whales have a [social hierarchy](#) and are known to stick together, even when some become sick or injured, said Tony LaCasse, spokesman for the New England Aquarium in Boston.

"They tend not to leave animals behind," LaCasse said. "In a near-shore environment, that can be their death knell."

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Citation: Georgia beachgoers help pilot whales from stranding on shore (2019, July 17) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-georgia-beachgoers-whales-stranding-shore.html>

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