

Hundreds of volunteers help save five whales stranded off Florida beach

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Five pilot whales stranded in shallow water on a Florida beach were rescued Monday afternoon thanks to the efforts of scientists, the Coast Guard, and a small army of beachgoers who volunteered to help.

Authorities were notified of the [whales](#) at Redington Beach by a 911 call that came through around 6:30 a.m. from a concerned beachgoer who reported seeing whales splashing in the shallows and spouting through their blowholes.

Marine biologists and veterinarians from the Clearwater Marine Aquarium and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, alongside Coast Guard officers and volunteers, swung into action Monday morning to set up shades over the whales to protect them from sun damage.

With the sun climbing into the sky and the tide going out, rescue teams had to work quickly. Once biologists determined the whales were healthy enough to withstand being relocated around midday, teams of volunteers assembled to lift them using canvas slings, with over a dozen people teaming up to lift each whale.

"It was really hard work," said Thomas Nuhfer, a 27-year-old student from Clearwater who helped carry one of the whales. "But it was so great to see people who didn't even know each other come together and work together to help."

By 4 p.m., all five whales were successfully hoisted out of the water, drawing cheers from the crowd that had gathered. The three larger whales were placed in boats to be taken back out to sea, while the two other, younger whales were lifted into transport vehicles to be driven to a Clearwater Marine Aquarium facility in Tarpon Springs for medical treatment and testing.

Pilot whales are social animals that travel in pods. An entire pod being beached, known as a "mass stranding," is highly rare and has only taken place about a dozen times since 1990, according to Clearwater Marine Aquarium spokesperson Carlee Wendell.

Scientists still aren't sure what drove the whales to swim toward land and strand themselves.

"Something is obviously wrong here. It could be that one whale is sick and beached and the others followed, or they could all be sick," Wendell said.

Mike Walsh, a University of Florida professor of marine biology, said whale pods are led by one animal that makes decisions about where to migrate.

Pilot whales typically live in deep waters and do not travel within the Gulf of Mexico. Because this pod made the decision to swim toward shore, Walsh said, separating the whales by taking three out to sea and two to an aquarium facility may be the best way to ensure the whales don't return.

"Otherwise, the two might vocalize to (the three larger whales) and call them back into shore," Walsh said.

The two smaller whales will be evaluated for a couple of days. If they're healthy, they too will be transported back out to sea. All the whales will be given satellite tags, which could tell scientists where they're from and how they ended up stranded here.

But determining the whales' health takes time, according to Walsh.

"We don't know everything that's wrong with them yet," Walsh said. "A lot of times in these situations they may seem strong and then start to die on you."

A crowd of over 100 bystanders gathered Monday, watching the rescue effort behind police tape set up by Pinellas County Sheriff's deputies.

Breanna Blankenship, a pastry chef from North Redington, was among the volunteers helping to cool down the whales.

"It's exciting to be so close to them but sad because they're in distress," Blankenship said after exiting the water. "It seems like they're getting there, and their respiration is pretty good."

Barbara Konstant, a retiree and Redington Beach resident, stood among the crowd to watch the [rescue effort](#) from the beach.

"I've lived here for years and I've never heard of whales doing this. I've never even seen whales here," she said. "I just hope they're going to be OK."

According to Walsh, the whales weren't showing major signs of distress throughout the ordeal.

"This is all new enough to them that they don't know that it's bad, but it could be potentially stressful," he said.

Jess Powell, a biologist with NOAA who spent the morning in the water with the whales, said scientists will closely track the whales' movement in the coming days using satellite tags to understand more about where they came from and monitor their progress.

Rescue boats are unable to travel hundreds of miles offshore to the [pilot whales](#)' native waters, but the whales will be dropped off several miles offshore where they aren't at risk of being caught in shallow waters again.

"Everything went according to plan today," Powell said. "Now we just hope that they find their way home."

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