

Dozens of whales strand at notorious New Zealand bay

February 22 2021

New Zealand whale stranding



Rescuers were racing Monday to save dozens of pilot whales that beached on a stretch of New Zealand coast notorious for mass strandings, wildlife officials said.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) said the pod of 49 long-finned pilot whales was found early Monday at Farewell Spit, about 90 kilometres (55 miles) north of the South Island tourist town of Nelson.

By mid-afternoon, nine of the whales had died and more than 60 people were working to keep the survivors alive for an attempt to refloat them at high tide, the DOC said.

"Marine mammal medics will assist with refloating the whales and caring for them on the beach, keeping them cool and wet until they can be refloated," a DOC spokeswoman said.

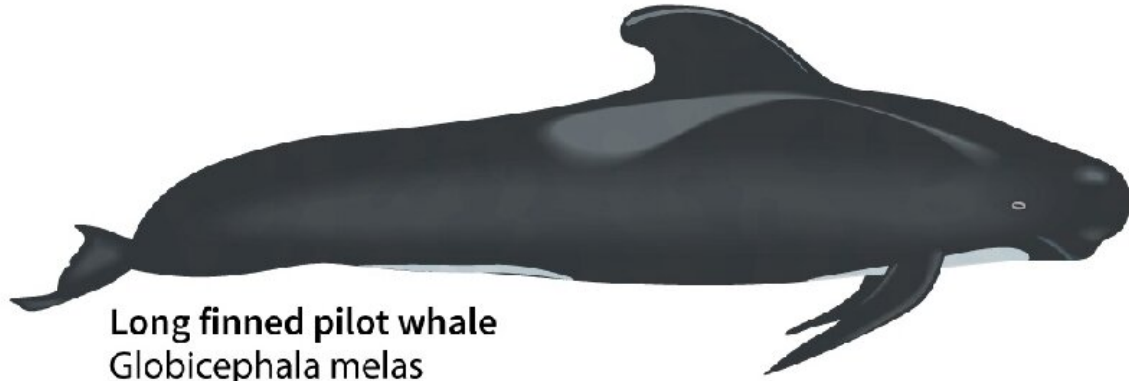
Farewell Spit is a 26-kilometre hook of sand that protrudes into the sea at Golden Bay.

It has been the scene of at least 10 pilot whale strandings in the past 15 years, the most recent in February 2017, when almost 700 of the marine mammals beached, resulting in 250 deaths.

Scientists are unclear as to why the beach is so deadly, although one theory is that the spit creates a shallow seabed in the bay that interferes with the whales' sonar navigation systems.

What goes wrong in beachings?

Pilot whales are one of the most common species for mass strandings, and like other toothed whales, they use echolocation to find their way



Long finned pilot whale
Globicephala melas

Still a matter of debate, several theories are prominent
Including

- **Sickness**
Diseased individuals have been known to beach themselves. In social pods, groups could be following
- **Predators or prey**
A pod could be forced into danger by predators, or else by following prey
- **Extreme weather**
Bad conditions could scramble sonar, even bubbles caused by raindrops could muddy the data
- **Noise pollution**
Oceans are filled with human-made noises, including shipping and high-frequency anti-submarine sonars
- **Long gently sloping beaches**
Very shallow inclines of some beaches could make it difficult for whales to “see” the danger as their sonar fails to detect any obstructions

Source: Sciencenewsforstudents.org/nzgeo.com/nature.com

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