

Wayward sea lion is back—this time found in a San Diego storm drain

May 17 2022, by Teri Figueroa



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Meet Freeway. He's a teenage mischief maker, a land-loving sea lion fishing for freedom.

And now the pinniped, who earned notoriety in January when he shut down a busy San Diego [freeway](#) a couple miles from the ocean, is back.

Last month, someone spotted him wandering up a storm drain in Logan Heights, about a half-mile from where the drain hits San Diego Harbor. A SeaWorld Rescue team plucked him from the muck April 7. It took some coaxing to catch him, SeaWorld Rescue team supervisor Jeni Smith said last week.

If he'd stayed in that storm drain, he would have made it back to the freeway interchange where he disrupted traffic in January. It's a direct shot.

Since his most recent [rescue](#), Freeway has been in a rehab of sorts, getting his behavior assessed. Nobody knows why he keeps going so far inland.

On Jan. 7, Freeway made a brazen midmorning attempt to cross state Route 94 near state Route 15, east of downtown San Diego. Shocked drivers screeched their cars to a halt at the sight of him. A few jumped out and stopped other cars so Freeway could scoot safely across eastbound lanes to the grass in the center divide.

SeaWorld's Rescue team responded, scooped him up, watched him for a month and then returned him to the ocean.

They'd first rescued him a few months earlier in November, when they found him walking on to Harbor Island Drive. They rehabbed him at SeaWorld for a week, fitted his left flipper with an orange tag and dropped him back into the sea.

January marked rescue No. 2. April made it three.

Those are just the rescues. He's been spotted ashore a few times since that first rescue—Point Loma, Encinitas, Cardiff. But those spots are near the water.

He doesn't have an official name. SeaWorld's Rescue team doesn't name the creatures they save. But unofficially and affectionately, some call him Freeway.

After his highway stunt, the rescuers added a second orange tag, this one on the right flipper, so he could be identified quickly and easily.

The tags hold identifying data, but they are not geo-locators. Those pricey trackers are used for endangered species and the like.

When SeaWorld Rescue got the call about a [sea lion](#) in a storm drain last month, the caller could not see the orange tags. But SeaWorld staffers suspected it was Freeway.

Smith said his April adventure took him well out of his habitat.

"There was no food source for him. He was sadly amongst trash and shopping carts," she said.

The animal reacted when he saw the rescuers approach, she said. When they offered up fish, he gladly took it. When animals wander out of their ocean habitat, it's usually for food, Smith said.

Freeway's weight is good and Smith believes he eats in the ocean without problem. His body condition is also good, no bumps or bruises.

They figure he's about 10 to 13 years old. At last check, he weighed 85.5 kilograms—roughly 188 pounds.

Sea lions can be spotted hanging out in crowds, flopped onto each other. No one knows why Freeway is not staying with a big group. At SeaWorld, he's been living with three other three sea lions, and he has been social with them.

Freeway is one of 37 [sea lions](#) SeaWorld has rescued this year. Occasionally, the team has to rescue an animal more than once. It's not often, though, and most of the time the animals are found in their natural habitat. They may be emaciated, may be tangled in [fishing line](#), may have a shark bite.

The goal is always to get the animal healthy and return it to the wild, Smith said.

Freeway remains at the park while SeaWorld staffers continue assessing his behavior and trying to figure out a plan for him. No date is set yet for his return to the ocean.

"We want him to be in a safe situation," Smith said. "We want to do what is best for the sea lion. ... Right now, because he has been rescued three times in unsafe situations, we are trying to figure out what his plan is."

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