

# 'This is a really good day': 12 rescued, rehabbed manatees released at Florida's Blue Spring State Park

February 14 2023, by Kevin Spear

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Blue Spring in Volusia County is a popular place to see manatees but there's never been an event like Monday, when manatee after manatee

was unloaded from trucks and set free after a long stay in recovery and rehabilitation.

A dozen from [early morning](#) to early afternoon were given final measurements and last health checks, equipped with GPS location transmitters and photographed for scientific purposes—and just for the joy of it.

The animals had gotten a lot of hands-on care from a lot of caretakers in many states and several aquariums. While a few dozen lucky visitors at Blue Spring State Park got to watch, what they saw was a happy snippet in a long, complex and costly timeline.

"This is a really good day," said Teresa Calleson, lead [manatee](#) recovery biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She tracks the [manatees](#) brought in from the wild for care in captivity.

There were 97 of those until Monday's release of 12. Another four or five will be released Tuesday in Crystal River.

Cooler weather is ideal for manatee releases at Blue Spring, said Monica Ross, director of manatee research and conservation at Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute.

Young, inexperienced manatees can follow the herd at Blue Spring, foraging in the nearby St. Johns River and taking refuge in [spring](#) waters when temperatures drop. Caretakers require that there be at least 50 manatees at Blue Spring for releases to occur.

"We want them to learn that here is the cold," Ross said, pointing to the river, then turning to spring waters, "and here is the warm."

The dozen manatees had been cared for by Jacksonville Zoo and

Gardens, SeaWorld Orlando, Miami Seaquarium, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, Living Seas at Disney, Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters and Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden.

They all coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as members of a group called the Manatee Rescue and Research Partnership.

All but one of the released manatees had been rescued as calves from Atlantic [coastal waters](#) and cared for until they reached about 600 pounds: Alby, Artemis, Asha, Bianca, Ferret, Finch, Lilpeep, Manhattan, Maximoff, Scampi and Swimshady.

A visitor from Massachusetts, Don Datsford, said it's hard to appreciate the enormity of a manatee until seeing one in the wild. A friend, Stan Rogalski of Palm Coast, said he brings visitors to Blue Spring two or three times a winter for glimpse of what many have never seen before.

But while [park visitors](#) can get glimpses of manatees in springs waters, caretakers have watched manatees in rehab for a year or two and won't take their eyes off them for a year or so after their release.

A Clearwater aquarium team will track the animals' travels via the GPS transmitters and field visits to ensure they are behaving as they should and not getting into trouble again.

Also released was Inigo, a bigger fellow with a harrowing journey. He was rescued in December 2021 from Brevard County's Indian River in a severe state of starvation.

The Indian River in Central Florida has seen an ecosystem collapse in recent years that has wiped the primary diet of manatees, seagrass.

Inigo recovered and was released back into the wild, only to be struck by a boat last summer and rescued again.

At exactly 1,000 pounds, he was hauled from the back of a box truck at Blue Spring and given a sonogram. His back was marked with an orange grease pencil to indicate the location of fat layers, which were photographed.

With a small army of caretakers tugging on his sling, he was eased into Blue Spring waters.

He dove, swam a few tight circles and then vanished in the herd.

"Now we have to watch out for them," said Cora Berchem, who monitors Blue Spring manatees for the Save the Manatee Club, and noted the enormous number of people responsible for bringing rehabbed manatees to the springs. "We are their eyes and ears here now."

2023 Orlando Sentinel.

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Citation: 'This is a really good day': 12 rescued, rehabbed manatees released at Florida's Blue Spring State Park (2023, February 14) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-good-day-rehabbed-manatees-florida.html>

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