

A rarely seen whale has died in the Florida Keys, and biologists are investigating

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Marine mammal scientists are investigating the cause of death of a rarely seen whale found in the shallow waters of the Florida Keys.

Bystanders saw the animal struggling in about two to three feet of water around Harry Harris Park, a small oceanfront park in Tavernier, around 4 p.m. Sunday and called the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The agency then contacted the federally sanctioned whale stranding response nonprofit, Dolphins Plus Marine Mammal Responder, which dispatched a team within 30 minutes.

But it was too late.

The 14-foot long animal, an adult male Gervais' beaked whale, had died, said Art Cooper, a biologist and founder of Dolphins Plus Marine Mammal Responder.

Fish and wildlife officers towed the whale to a local marina where it stayed until it was taken to a U.S. Park Service station in Key Largo, where scientists conducted their necropsy—an autopsy for animals—on Monday beneath tents set up under a canopy of trees over a boat ramp.

The scientists took measurements before eventually cutting into its body to take samples and to inspect for possible injuries or signs of illness or injury.

Cooper said it's too early to tell what happened to the whale. But so far, there's nothing obvious to indicate that it was related to human activity such as a boat strike.

"I think this is an older animal," Cooper said.

He surmised this because the whale's torso was covered in dark polka dot-looking circles that Cooper said were scars from cookie-cutter shark bites. The small sharks have round mouths lined with razor sharp teeth. When they bite, they leave circular wounds and remove inverted ice cream cone shaped pieces of flesh, Cooper said.

"It takes a long time to heal," Cooper said. "If you look at this guy's belly, he's been around for a while."

Gervais' beaked [whales](#) can live between 27 and 48 years, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Since they prefer very [deep water](#), they are rarely seen in the shallower water that surrounds the Florida Keys.

"I've been doing this 33 years," Cooper, 54, said. "This is the third beaked whale I've seen."

Despite the initial indication this whale died of old age, National Marine Fisheries Service officials wanted Cooper's team, which worked with FWC biologists, to conduct the necropsy because this was the second pelagic—or [open water](#)—whale to be found dead off the Keys in less than a week, he said.

Last week, a large dead sperm whale was reportedly spotted about 40 miles off the Middle Keys city of Marathon, Cooper said.

Scientists never got a chance to inspect the animal because predators had gotten to its carcass, eventually eating its stomach. When that happens, the mammals sink, Cooper said.

Apart from the initial necropsy done at the Park Service's station, much of the other parts of the animal will be tested elsewhere by scientists, and the skull will undergo a CT scan at the National Marine Fisheries Service's lab in Key Biscayne , Cooper said.

The rest will be returned to the water, where Cooper said animals like bull sharks, commonly found in the shallows off the Keys, will likely devour the carcass in a matter of hours.

"Since this animal was not euthanized," he said, "we can recycle the carcass and whatever part we're not scientifically interested in."

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