

STRANDED

Part 2: Animal Rescue and the New England Aquarium

By **Cristina Santiestevan**

In our Winter Issue, we told the story of a mass dolphin stranding off of Wellfleet, MA, as well as the story of Mona, the grey seal who lost an eye to her injuries, but was successfully released back into the wild. Since the Aquarium works with so many stranded animals and people always want to know more about them, we decided to continue that article in this issue. This time, we're recounting the story of an extremely rare animal—a leatherback sea turtle—that washed up onshore and was treated by the Aquarium.

It took more than eight strong and capable adults to move the listless leatherback sea turtle from the idling animal ambulance. They struggled down the narrow hall to a waiting cushion in the Aquarium's rehabilitation area. At 374 pounds and just over 5 feet in length, this individual was actually on the small side—leatherbacks are the largest turtles on the planet, and some can weigh a ton or more.

The New England Aquarium is accustomed to sea turtle patients. Every year, anywhere from a dozen to more than 100 sick and wounded sea turtles receive medical care here. Most are the critically endangered Kemp's ridley, which are generally the size of a dinner plate and weigh 3 to 8 pounds. These turtles are usually cold-stunned—hypothermic—a result of plunging air and water temperatures during New England's late fall and early winter months. The New England Aquarium is one of the premier sea turtle rehabilitation centers in the United States, and has treated hundreds of Kemp's ridley sea turtles since 1969.

A leatherback sea turtle, however, is another matter entirely. Leatherbacks are extremely challenging patients. They are enormous, eat a specialized diet of mostly sea jellies, and are poorly understood. Adding to the challenge, leatherbacks are highly adapted for life in the boundless open ocean. They do not comprehend barriers well, and may swim continuously into the walls of their enclosure, resulting in wounds and possible infections. Despite these slim odds, Aquarium staff and volunteers were determined to try.

This sea turtle was not obviously injured, but it had washed ashore twice over two days near the Cape Cod town of Dennis. After the second stranding, Aquarium veterinarians decided the turtle was too sick to return to the water. And so, shortly after 6 p.m. on November 1, 2005, a collection of staff and volunteers gathered anxiously at the Aquarium to discuss treatment options for their newest patient.

Once the turtle was settled into the rehabilitation facility, work began in earnest. A volunteer began counting the seconds between each breath while an animal technician drew blood samples. The leatherback's condition was mysterious. It did not appear to have any injuries or wounds, but was obviously very ill. Blood tests revealed that the turtle's electrolytes were low, which suggested that it had not been eating well. The turtle also had internal parasites, which may or may not have been related to its illness. It would be kept under a constant 24-hour watch for the duration of its stay at the Aquarium.

The following morning, carpenters began installing a T-shaped brace above a rehabilitation pool, where the leatherback would later be allowed to swim. One of the biggest challenges with rehabilitating leatherbacks is their tendency to swim into walls



Aquarium veterinarian Dr. Charles Innis and team tend to the leatherback on the beach.

Photo/C. Santiestevan

and other obstacles. To prevent the leatherback from injuring itself, the Aquarium's rehabilitation staff had kept it out of the water. But now they had an idea.

While the carpenters worked on the T-shaped brace, Aquarium staff and volunteers created a custom harness for the turtle out of felt-like car-wash strips. This harness was attached by a short leash to the newly installed support system above the turtle's pool. By 9 p.m. on November 2, a little more than 24 hours after arriving at the Aquarium, the leatherback sea turtle was moved into the 3,600-gallon pool. The harness system was a success, and the turtle was able to swim without injuring itself. The turtle appeared to react positively to being placed in the water. And, most exciting, the harness and leash could be easily modified for any future leatherback patients.

The leatherback appeared to be responding to medical treatment. Medical tests on November 3 revealed that its glucose levels had begun to improve. The turtle seemed more alert. It appeared to be breathing more regularly. Despite these apparently positive signs, staff and volunteers were concerned. The turtle remained critical. And, medical tests had still not revealed the cause of its condition.

Then, shortly after midnight on November 4, the turtle stopped breathing. Onsite staff responded immediately, but were unable to revive it. The turtle had been with the Aquarium for less than three days.

Staff and volunteers throughout the Aquarium were predictably morose. Those involved directly with the animal's medical care had slept little, if any, since it had arrived on the evening of November 1. Nothing had been withheld from the attempt to save the turtle. A necropsy—animal autopsy—revealed that the leatherback had

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Dr. Innis examines the leatherback patient.

Photo/C. Santiestevan



Beach Babies Belong on the Beach

He was less than a week old when strangers stole him away from his parents. They meant well—he was all alone and his parents were nowhere in sight. He must have appeared completely helpless to the strangers who discovered him. How could any considerate person leave this abandoned baby to fend for himself?

But this was no human baby, and he had not been abandoned. He was a common tern chick, and he was safely resting while his parents fished. He was an adorable puffball of brown and white downy feathers, perfectly blended in with the sand and stone of the beach where he was found. He easily fit into the palm of an adult's hand. And he certainly would have seemed much too delicate to be left all alone on that long expanse of Massachusetts beach.

It is easy to understand why those well-intentioned strangers intervened. They did not know that the chick was perfectly safe. Nor did they know that “rescuing” him would ruin any chance he had of living a normal life.

Every spring, well-meaning people whisk untold numbers of baby animals away from the wild. In nearly every case, these rescue attempts are unnecessary and misguided. Many adult animals leave their offspring alone for minutes or hours every day while they forage for food. Baby seals, for example, often rest on the beach while their mothers fish. Others, like deer or rabbits, stay away as much as possible in order to avoid calling attention to their young.

So, what should you do if you find a baby animal



this spring? Enjoy the moment—but just for a moment—and then walk away. Baby animals can be adorable, but please resist the temptation to pet or handle them. Some are easily injured, others may bite or scratch and many carry diseases or parasites that can be passed to humans.

The “rescued” common tern can never be released into the wild. Common terns learn to hunt and migrate from their parents, and it would be impossible to teach him these skills now. Instead, he lives at the Aquarium with several other shorebirds, all of which cannot be released into the wild for various reasons. You can visit him at the Boston Harbor shorebirds exhibit on the third floor.

What if the animal really looks orphaned or injured?

Sometimes—rarely—wild animals do need human assistance. If you find an animal that looks orphaned, injured or ill, do not try to help it yourself. Instead, observe from a safe distance (several hundred yards) for several hours or more. Remember that some animals, such as rabbits or deer, only visit their young a few times every day. If you are convinced the animal needs help, call a wildlife rehabilitator. A list of Massachusetts rehabilitators is available at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfw_rehab.htm.

—C.S.

Visit these websites for more information:

neaq.org/rescue
massaudubon.org/wildlife

Drs. Charles Innis and Scott Weber make sure the leatherback's harness is properly secure and the turtle is responsive.

Photo/C. Santiestevan



an exceptionally weak heart, and was displaying symptoms of congestive heart failure. It appeared to have been suffering from pneumonia and a fungal infection, and fluid had collected in its lungs. The turtle had been much too sick to save.

Despite its death, the veterinarians and rescue staff learned a great deal about working with leatherback sea turtles, and were particularly proud of their harness system. Someday, the knowledge and experience gained through this rescue attempt will be used to help rehabilitate another rescued leatherback sea turtle.