

Marine Mammal Rescue & Conservation

We rescue stranded marine mammals, release them back into the wild whenever possible, investigate the causes, and share our expertise around the world.



Responders carefully transport a bottlenose dolphin to a release site.

When the tide is low, the stakes are high for marine mammals

Cape Cod has long been a hotspot for whale and dolphin strandings.

Each year, IFAW's Marine Mammal Rescue (MMR) team responds to hundreds of calls for animals in distress — from single stranded seals to large groups of dolphins needing urgent help. Our coastline may be beautiful, but its unique geography creates conditions that can easily confuse and trap marine mammals.

Responding to these emergencies takes strength, skill, and dedication. Our staff and volunteers work long days in all kinds of weather to give every animal the best possible chance of survival. Rescue after rescue, they provide hands-on care, specialized equipment, veterinary support, and the expert decision-making that has made this team one of the most experienced in the world.

While the demands on the team continue to grow, so does the impact. Over nearly three decades on the Cape, IFAW has developed innovative rescue techniques — many now used globally — that have improved outcomes for stranded animals and strengthened response networks worldwide. At IFAW, we believe every animal matters — as an individual, as part of a species, and as a vital contributor to a healthy ocean.

Your support ensures we can keep answering every call, every time, and continue saving lives along our shores. With your help, we can be there for the animals who need us most.

Party for a Porpoise

Wychmere Beach Club
Harwich Port, MA

Save the date: **August 6, 2026**

For more information,
please contact:

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or visit pfap26.givesmart.com





Responders quickly tend to a total of 14 bottlenose dolphins stranded in Brewster, Massachusetts.

Marine Mammal Rescue

On the scene: largest dolphin stranding in US history

IFAW's marine mammal rescue team on Cape Cod responded to the largest mass dolphin stranding in US history in 2024.



IFAW program director Brian Sharp shares the story.

It started off as a normal day. At 5:30 a.m. we got a call about a single stranded dolphin. We responded, got the animal on board Moby — IFAW's mobile dolphin rescue unit — provided a health assessment, gave it a satellite tag, and released it. The team thought we'd be cleaned up by lunchtime.

Within minutes, a hotline call came in reporting 10 animals had stranded. That number grew to 50, then 80. Eventually, we realized there were well over 100. Our volunteer responders arrived first and found water rushing out of the Herring River, leaving dolphins stretched out over a large swath of beach. I remember coming up over the hill and thinking: we were very quickly outnumbered.

Most dolphins weigh 300 to 400 pounds, and some were sinking into the mud — in some cases becoming

suctioned into it. If a dolphin's blowhole is near mud, they can inhale it while trying to breathe. We had to get responders out immediately. Staff used wet sheets to protect the animals from sun exposure, which can cause blistering in as little as 20 to 30 minutes. Fortunately, it was a cooler day.

Just as quickly as the stranding started, the tide changed. Water rushed in so fast that dolphins were getting rolled by the incoming surge — a whole new level of danger for the animals and our responders. We knew we couldn't remove them through traditional means. Instead, we used our boats to herd as many as possible into deeper water before losing light.

On day two we herded 10 dolphins and rescued one. By day three, we received a call that 20 animals had stranded 45 minutes away. We made the decision to move our resources where the greatest good could be done — and rescued 18 of those 20.

By day five, equipment and responders alike were worn out. A few dolphins remained trapped in the harbor, so we made the difficult decision to carefully strand them ourselves in a controlled location where we could assess their

health, treat them, and move them safely to deep water. Eleven dolphins were stranded this way, loaded onto stretchers, brought into Moby, transported to Provincetown, and released.

In total, 146 dolphins stranded — 102 survived, a release rate of about 70 percent. Given the scale of the event, that was honestly more than we could have hoped for. Satellite tag data confirms the dolphins are still out there, rejoining pods, not just surviving but thriving. That's the biggest sign of success.

None of it would have been possible without our 80-plus volunteer responders, who were on scene from morning to sunset every day, and the remarkable support from the town of Wellfleet, their police department, and the harbor master. It's an honor to be able to work alongside this team and see the dedication they put into their lives every day.

