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.

Photo: IFAW / © IFAW, Activities conducted under a federal stranding agreement between IFAW and NMFS under the MMPA

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

Cape Cod has long been a hotspot for whale and dolphin strandings, but 2024 was one for the record books. IFAW's marine mammal rescue (MMR) team faced a staggering series of challenges, receiving **1,392** calls to our stranding hotline and responding to **654** animals in distress. **In an average year, IFAW responds to 57 live dolphin strandings. In 2024, we responded to 319!**

Last year's unprecedented stranding rate affected IFAW's MMR team physically, mentally, and financially. Long hours in the sun, wind, cold, rain, and snow exhausted and zapped the strength of staff and volunteers alike. Ensuring the proper care and treatment of each animal meant additional staff time, personal protective equipment, veterinary supplies, and diagnostic testing.

Although stranding numbers on the Cape have steadily increased over the years, one bright spot has emerged. IFAW's work has led to innovations that offer hope to the international rescue community, and we are proud to share the gold-standard practices we have developed through years of field experience worldwide.

Responding to record levels of marine strandings is important and resource-intensive. Your generous philanthropic support will help ensure we can respond to every distress call and continue to do what we have done for 27 years on Cape Cod: save lives.

Like you, IFAW is fueled by the belief that every animal matters as an individual, a member of its species, and an essential contributor to its ecosystem. **Thank you for joining us in this vital work!**

ifaw

Party for a Porpoise
Save the date: August 14, 2025
Wianno Club | Osterville, MA

For more information, please contact:
Alix Cabral at **events@ifaw.org**
or visit **ifaw.org/pfap-25**

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Marine Mammal Rescue

On the scene: largest dolphin stranding in US history

In the summer of 2024, IFAW's marine mammal rescue team, located on Cape Cod, MA, responded to the largest mass dolphin stranding in US history. Program Lead Brian Sharp shares, in his own words, details about the multi-day event.

It started off as a normal day for the team. At 5:30 a.m. we got a call about a single stranded dolphin. The team responded and got the animal on board Moby (IFAW's mobile dolphin rescue unit) to provide a health assessment and supportive care treatments. The animal was then given a satellite tag and released.

The team thought 'alright, this is great, we'll be cleaned up and done by lunchtime.' Within minutes, a dolphin hotline call came in reporting that 10 animals had stranded. Within a matter of minutes, that number grew to 50 and then 80. Eventually we realized there were well over 100 animals.

Our volunteer responders arrived first at the scene and found water rushing out of the Herring River, leaving dolphins stretched out over a large swath of area. I remember what I was feeling as I came up over the hill: we were very quickly outnumbered at this point.

Most dolphins can weigh anywhere from 300 to 400 pounds, and because of that weight some of the animals were sinking into mud and, in some cases, becoming suctioned into it. If a dolphin's blowhole is near the mud, they can inhale and ingest it while they are trying to breathe, so part of the rush was to get our responders out to these animals and start supportive care.

We quickly realized that our normal operations would not work. When a single animal strands, we go out as a team, put the dolphin on a stretcher, and bring it into Moby. Then we give the dolphin a full health assessment, begin treatment, administer IV fluids, and perform diagnostics on the way to Provincetown where we release. That simply was not an option with this many.

The staff and responders were using wet sheets to help protect the dolphins from the sun and also to cool them down. Dolphins' skin is not adapted like ours; they can blister in as little as 20 to 30 minutes. Fortunately, it was a cooler day, so the dolphins had a bit of a reprieve from the heat.

As quickly as the stranding event started, the tide changed. Now we were faced with water rushing in at such a fast rate that the animals were getting rolled by the incoming tide. It created a whole new level of danger for these animals and for the responders. Once the tide hits its peak there is an additional 10 to 12 feet of water. We knew that we couldn't remove these animals through our traditional means. We had to herd them out and keep them together as a group. We used our boats to get as many out to deeper water as we could before we lost light.

On day two we knew there would be more dolphins, so we responded immediately at daybreak. We were able to herd 10 dolphins and rescue one. As the event continued on day three, we were getting ready to continue herding operations again when we got a call that 20 animals had stranded about 45 minutes away from where we were currently

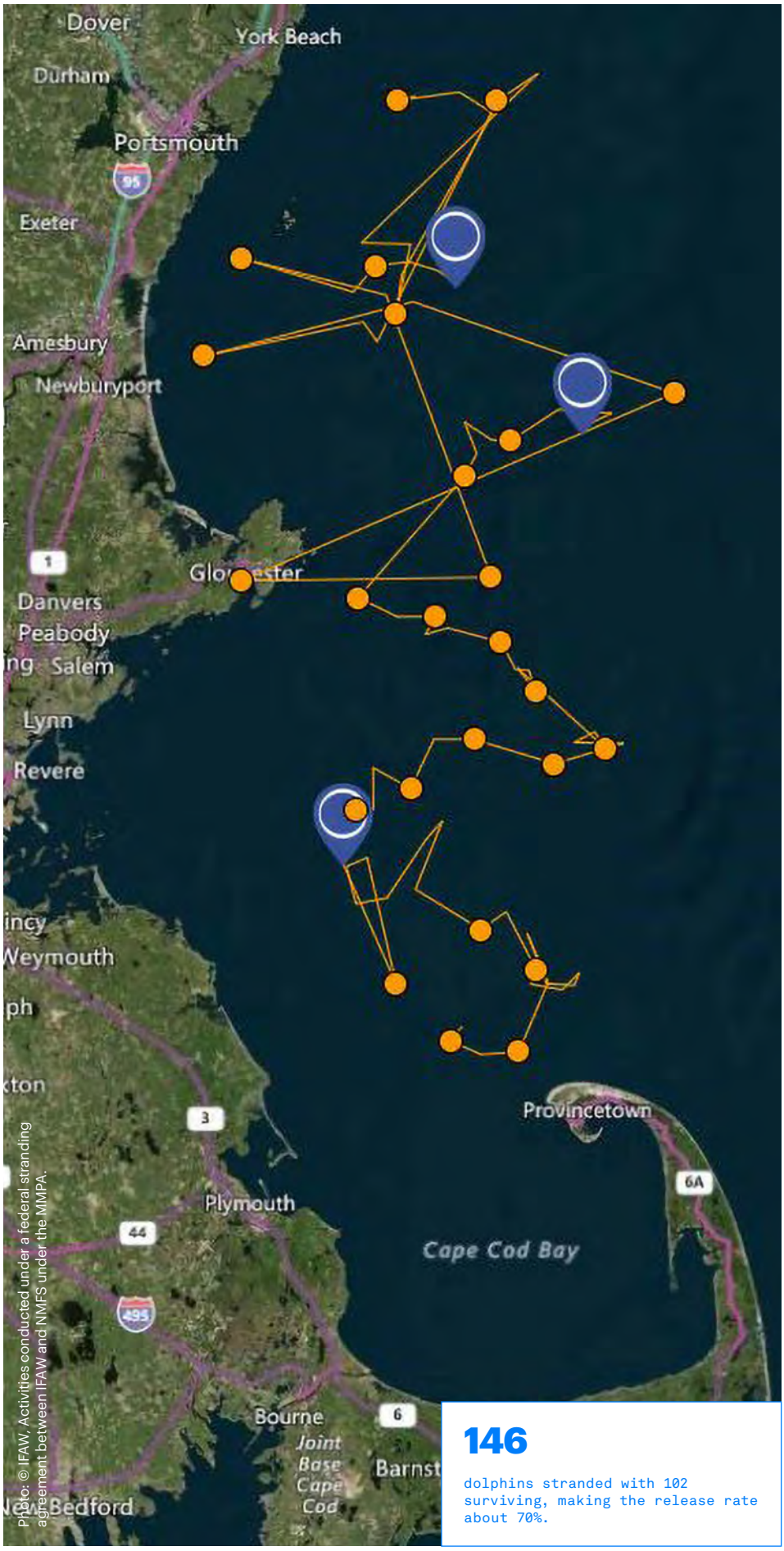

Photo: © IFAW. Activities conducted under a federal stranding agreement between IFAW and NMFS under the MMPA.

146

dolphins stranded with 102 surviving, making the release rate about 70%.

stationed. The team made the decision to move our resources to where the greatest good could be done and split off to try and provide aid to those dolphins. We were able to respond and rescue 18 of the 20 dolphins that had stranded.

By day five our equipment and our responders were worn out. By this time, we had herded most of the dolphins out, but a few remained trapped in the harbor. We decided to carefully strand them so we could assess their health, treat them, and move them safely to deep water to avoid having the animals go through additional days trapped in that deadly tidal area, accumulating more stress. We stranded 11 dolphins in a location from which they could be rescued. Staff were already on scene to provide aid to each dolphin, and we began the process of getting them onto stretchers and into Moby. Two were given tags.

The dolphins were transported to Provincetown and released. That was the end of the live dolphin response, but there was still more to be done. The next day the team started performing necropsies to determine whether underlying conditions may have caused the stranding.

In total, 146 dolphins stranded with 102 surviving, making the release rate about 70%. Given the size of the event, it was honestly more than we could have hoped for.

The data from the satellite tags shows that the dolphins are still out there. They are rejoining pods, and not only are they surviving, but they are thriving. That's the biggest sign of success.

We had over 80 volunteer responders who were part of this event every day from morning until sunset providing aid to these animals. We also received wonderful support from the town of Wellfleet, their police department, and the harbormaster department. It's an honor to be able to work alongside this team and see the dedication they put into their lives every day.

Brian Sharp
Senior Biologist

◀ Responders race to save dolphins in Wellfleet, MA.

◀ Satellite tag data from three dolphins tagged during the 146-dolphin stranding response shows they have successfully moved to deep water.