

[From Summer 2001]

## **Wildlife's 911**

Through a regime of management techniques and conservation, the Chincoteague refuge provides necessary habitat for a variety of wildlife and plants. Staff members work on an assortment of projects aimed at optimizing conditions for migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other native wildlife. But what is our protocol in dealing with injured or sick animals on the refuge and surrounding area? In some cases, we are obligated to take action such as in the case of threatened and endangered species or other federally protected species. Other times, we will respond when staff is available. However, national wildlife refuges are not wildlife rehabilitation centers nor are they the animal control facilities. The following accounts illustrate some of CNWR's recent encounters with injured wildlife.

On May 8th, a common dolphin stranded itself in Toms Cove. Common dolphins are pelagic animals which means they are animals of the open sea and rarely come close to shore. They are also highly gregarious, traveling in herds of several hundred. For this lone dolphin to be separated from its herd and caught in a shallow cove, biologists knew that something was seriously wrong. The Virginia Marine Science Museum Stranding Center in Virginia Beach was contacted for assistance. Staff worked to keep the beached animal wet while protecting its skin from possible sunburn. Staff also worked to keep the crushing weight of its body off of its flippers and managed to successfully transport the animal from Toms Cove to a more easily accessible location for the stranding team. Members of the Stranding Center assessed the animal's health and made the difficult decision to euthanize the dying dolphin. According to one of the center's rehabilitators, the dolphin was raising and lowering its tail fluke, a signal that its muscles were severely cramping. Since the dolphin- is a pelagic animal, they find the restraints of a small holding tank stressful and usually die within a few days. In order to save the animal from several days of suffering, the dolphin was humanely put down with an injection.

On May 10th, both an injured bald eagle and an abandoned screech owl chick were reported to the refuge. Both animals were taken to Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, Inc. in Newark, Delaware. Unfortunately, the bald eagle had to be put down due to a badly injured wing. The screech owl, however, is doing well and is being raised with other screech owl chicks. It will be taught to hunt on its own and released when it is old enough.

On March 18th, a dead northern right whale, the world's rarest whale (an estimated 400 are left in existence), was discovered by refuge interns on the Wild Beach. The Virginia Marine Science Museum, the National Marine Fisheries Service, Science Magazine, the New England Aquarium, the U.S. Geological Survey, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, and news teams from Channel 3 and 13 out of Norfolk, as well as the Norfolk newspaper, were on site for a rare glimpse at a right whale. It was determined that the three-month-old male whale was killed by a boat strike, which was the second known right whale death attributed to a boat strike this year.

In October of 2000, two injured loggerhead sea turtles turned up in Toms Cove. Loggerheads are federally-listed as a threatened species. However, they are the most commonly observed sea turtle in Virginia. The turtles, affectionately named "Tom" (after biological technician Tom Penn who transported the animal) and "Frank" (short for Frankenstein due to the injuries and scars on its head), were sent to the Virginia Marine Science Museum Stranding Center for rehabilitation. Tom was released a month and a half later after being treated for cold stunning. Frank is still being treated at the Center, but is expected to be released soon.

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