



Critically endangered sea turtle rescued, rehabilitated and released back into the wild

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(Lake Charles, La.) - Audubon Nature Institute, in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), released a rehabilitated Kemp's ridley sea turtle into Lake Calcasieu in Cameron Parish near Lake Charles on Wednesday, May 10, 2017.

On July 26, 2016, biologists from LDWF were contacted by NOAA regarding a report of an incidentally captured live sea turtle. Bobby Aguillard, a commercial shrimper, captured the animal while trawling on the east side of the Cameron jetties approximately a half-mile offshore.

Following communications with Mandy Tumlin, Louisiana's Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding and Rescue Program Coordinator, Aguillard brought the turtle onboard and transported him safely to land. LDWF biologists later recovered the turtle and transported the federally protected species to Audubon's Coastal Wildlife Network (CWN) at the Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center (FMASSC) for treatment.

"Once the turtle was brought to us for rehabilitation, a full exam was administered to assess the animal's health," said Audubon's Stranding Coordinator Gabriella Vazquez. "The animal was slightly emaciated and dehydrated. Also, we noted a mouth and shoulder injury potentially caused from the turtle's capture."

Named "Raye" by Audubon animal care staff, the turtle received antibiotics, fluids and rest. Pain medications were administered and staff used a feeding tube for the first few days until the turtle could eat on his own.

Following an increase in appetite that produced a healthy weight gain, Audubon's veterinarian cleared the turtle for release. Tumlin collaborated with other researchers to determine the best release location for the juvenile sea turtle, and Audubon and LDWF partnered to release the rescued animal back into the wild.

Prior to release, LDWF tagged the sea turtle with an internal PIT (Passive Integrated Transponder) tag, similar to the tag placed inside dogs, cats, horses and other pets. Additionally, each of its front flippers received an external flipper tag with numbers specific to this turtle for identification purposes should it be captured again.

"Without the efforts of Mr. Aguillard and other citizens like him, we might not have found this animal or other similar success stories until it was too late for a rescue. I encourage anyone who may encounter a live marine mammal or sea turtle to report it to us as soon as possible," explained Tumlin. "These are federally protected and wild species and should not be handled prior to reporting and documenting with appropriate officials. Depending on the situation, we will walk observers through any necessary rescue efforts or advise if behaviors are normal and the animal should be left alone."

LDWF leads the response for sea turtle and marine mammal strandings and rescues along the coast of Louisiana. The Coastal Wildlife Network (CWN), coordinated by Audubon Nature Institute, serves as LDWF's primary response partner to collect data about existing animal populations along Louisiana's coast and waterways and to assist and support researchers in conservation of marine species. CWN is the only entity in the state of Louisiana allowed to rehabilitate sea turtles and marine mammals. CWN has rehabilitated more than 200 sea turtles since 2010.

"The members of the public are truly the eyes and ears for CWN. Without their help, rescuing animals like this wouldn't be possible," said Vazquez. "Anytime CWN gets to rescue, rehabilitate, and release a federally protected sea turtle back into its natural environment, it is a great day for us and the turtle. Supporting CWN is truly saving animals like this from extinction."

The public can contact LDWF's stranding and rescue hotline at (337) 962-7092 or Audubon Coastal Wildlife at (504) 235-3005 if an injured or stranded (live or dead) marine mammal or sea turtle is spotted. The public also can report marine mammal strandings through NOAA's Dolphin & Whale 911 app (<http://1.usa.gov/1b1kqfv>).

Audubon Nature Institute operates a family of museums, parks and research facilities dedicated to celebrating the wonders of nature. Through innovative live animal exhibits, education programs, and scientific discovery, Audubon makes a meaningful contribution to preserving wildlife for the future. Audubon Nature Institute flagships include Audubon Park, Audubon Zoo, Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, Entergy Giant Screen Theater, Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium, Audubon Louisiana Nature Center, Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center, Woldenberg Riverfront Park and Audubon Wilderness Park. Ron Forman is President and CEO of Audubon Nature Institute.

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