

# Volunteer lifesaver

## Santa Cruz woman heads local marine animal rescue effort



### To the rescue

Jennifer Sasseen

Claire Swain of Santa Cruz loads seal cages onto her truck in preparation for another beach rescue of an injured or sick animal.

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**W**HEN A SICK or injured seal or sea lion is found along Santa Cruz County's shoreline, Santa Cruz resident Claire Swain marshals her forces and goes to the rescue.

Swain is coordinator of the county's marine mammal rescue operation, which includes six other volunteers dedicated to helping marine mammals survive. If the animals in trouble are successfully captured, they are shipped to the California Marine Mammal Center in the Golden Gate National Recreational Area, a national park in the Marin headlands north of San Francisco.

Swain, 50, moved to Santa Cruz with her husband a little more than 10 years ago from the East Bay Area. She said she got involved with the Marine Mammal Center about a year later after she found a sea lion on the beach one morning. She learned at a local gift shop who to call and then stayed with the sea lion that day from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., when rescuers finally arrived to transport the animal to the center.

After that, Swain was hooked. For her first two or three years of working with the center, she was the only volunteer in the area, so she was

limited to reporting the animal's condition to the center and waiting until rescuers arrived. Then another woman volunteered and the two began doing rescues.

Nowadays, Swain's first action when she gets a call is to ask a volunteer to find out exactly where the animal is and how big it is, then report back. Swain's next step is to collect enough volunteers and equipment to perform the rescue.

Equipment includes nets and herding boards to guide the animal into a cage. Blankets are sometimes thrown over the animal's head to calm it down, because the proximity of people inevitably adds to its stress.

"The animal is on the beach because it's either sick or injured," Swain said. "They're out of their environment. They feel threatened by people."

The rescue operation is always dangerous, Swain said, because the animals are wild. It's often difficult to convince the public of that, she said, but not even Swain is immune to injury; she recounted the rescue of a small sea lion last year as an example of what can happen.

"We had people all around us and they had been walking by that animal for several hours," she said, "and the animal made no move to either

go back in the water or attack any of the people."

A sudden wave caused the sea lion to shoot out of the surf and Swain said she was unable to get her foot out of the rocks fast enough to move. She threw up her hand to protect her face and the sea lion clamped onto it, causing a tear that required 26 stitches. It convinced the crowd very quickly that marine mammals can be dangerous and strengthened Swain's resolve

to capture the animal, she said.

"We captured him," she said, "and we named him 'Stitches.'"

Rescue efforts couldn't save Stitches, however. Swain said he died at the center about two weeks later. Learning that an animal she's helped save has died is one of the hardest aspects of the rescues, she said.

"You cry and you get angry about the situation," she said, "but then you stop and think, we got it off the beach, that was the main thing; we've gotten it off the beach, we are trying to help it. If it dies, it isn't dying on the beach getting beat to death by the surf or thrown up against the rocks."

REFERENCE



The type of marine mammals rescued varies at different times of the year, Swain said.

Rescuers are more likely to run across harbor seals from March to May, elephant seals from January or February until April or May, and sea lions from July through September or October, she said.

Once an animal is captured and its cage placed in the back of Swain's truck, Swain said she calls the Marine Mammal Center to arrange a rendez-

vous. Sometimes, if the animal is in bad shape and center volunteers are too far away, she transports the animal herself.

Denice Springer, spokeswoman for the center, which covers 1,000 miles of coastline spanning 15 counties from the Oregon border to San Luis Obispo, described the center as "a giant sort of animal hospital." Animals are treated for a variety of diseases that are sometimes of epidemic proportions.

For example, Swain said, last year an infectious disease called leptospirosis was prevalent. The longer the year wore on, the sadder the rescues got, she said, because the disease was in more advanced stages in animals captured later.

"There were times we would pick an animal up and it was almost comatose on the beach," Swain said.

Diseases like leptospirosis can be transferred to humans, which poses another threat to people encountering marine mammals on the beach. Swain recalled a rescue in which a sea lion had been stranded in the surf.

"When we got down to the beach, there was a woman down in the surf with this animal and she had her arm around him," Swain said.

While the woman thought the 495-pound animal enjoyed her company, Swain said, the sea lion was actually on the verge of having a seizure and was in a state in which it was not really aware of the woman. Had a seizure occurred at that point, the woman could have been crushed, besides running the risk of catching leptospirosis or some other parasitic disease from the sea lion, Swain said.

Other times, people are just downright cruel, like the time an elephant seal hauled himself out onto Sunnycove Beach in Live Oak to rest and people started kicking sand and throwing rocks at him, Swain said.

More often than not, however, it's just ignorance that leads people to interfere with an animal, she said. Harbor seal pups are most prone to interference because the 14- to 16-pound animals look like "little balls of fluff," Swain said,

and are often left by their mothers on empty beaches that quickly become crowded in the summertime.

"Harbor seals have their pups anywhere; they have no particular breeding or birthing ground," Swain said. "So they leave their pup on a crowded beach. People think that the mother has abandoned the pup and all she's done is, she has gone out to feed.

"And when she's finished feeding, she'll call and that pup will swim out to her. We've had

people that have picked them up and taken them home."

That's illegal, Swain said, and gives the marine mammal rescuers no choice but to take the fragile pups to the center in hopes they can survive without their mothers.

Fifty percent of the marine mammals brought in to the center alive will someday make it back to the wild, center spokeswoman Springer said.

Springer said a 40 percent success rate is considered high in wildlife rehabilitation. She attributed the success of the center, founded in 1975 by a group of people concerned about ailing marine wildlife, to its 450 volunteers, including people like Swain who perform animal rescues.

"She's very special," Springer said, "and she really runs a dedicated operation down there."

It used to be, Springer said, that beached seals and sea lions were viewed as a threat to human health, and shot. The center changed all that.

Besides saving hundreds of marine mammals a year, the center is adding to the store of knowledge about marine life; animals that do not live to return to the wild are the subjects of post-mortem examinations that help scientists at the center understand why they died.

Swain said an examination — called a necropsy — of a sea lion rescued last month off Moran Lake Beach showed the animal had died for multiple reasons. Named Blondie by its rescuers, the sea lion not only appeared to have a gunshot wound, but the necropsy revealed a pierced esophagus and a fractured vertebrae that had caused a lung infection, Swain said.

The center, which survives on donations, memberships and volunteers, is licensed by the federal government to rescue beached marine mammals within its jurisdiction. Last year, Springer said, 318

marine mammals were brought into the center from throughout Northern California.

Sixty of those marine mammals were rescued in Santa Cruz County, Swain said, with 28 more mammals rescued so far this year in the county.

Swain said the largest animal local rescuers have captured was a 645-pound, adult male California sea lion, picked up in March from Pajaro Dunes. Appropriately enough, they named him Colossus.

His is the kind of story that makes it all worth it, Swain said. Colossus was tagged and released in June and has since been spotted off the coast of Washington, she said.

"I enjoy working with those animals," Swain said, "and I feel really good that an animal, especially an animal that we've picked up and I know has been in really bad shape, has been released to the wild.

"I feel that I have contributed to saving that animal's life."

## Don't touch that seal

Marine mammals are protected under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act and harassment could result in fines or jail, said Claire Swain, marine mammal rescue coordinator for Santa Cruz County.

Getting too close to a beached animal could be construed as harassment, Swain said, because it adds to the animal's stress and weakens its chances for survival.

"If you find an animal on the beach, do not go near it," she said. "And keep other people and dogs away from the area."

The second step is to call Native Animal Rescue, the Santa Cruz SPCA or the California Marine Mammal Center, north of San Francisco, which accepts calls 24 hours a day. Calls to any of those agencies will be forwarded to Swain, who will gather volunteers for a rescue.

It is also helpful to relay all the information possible to those agencies, such as the exact location and size of the animal, Swain said. The agencies are likely to ask for a description of the animal as well, such as whether it has spots.

The number of the Marine Mammal Center is (415) 331-SEAL. Anyone interested in becoming a rescue volunteer is also encouraged to call the center, as Swain said volunteers are always needed.

— Jennifer Sasseen



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**Claire Swain got some help from passersby Brad Houston, center, and Bob Sollfrank in rescuing Blondie last month at Moran Lake Beach. Blondie was too hurt to survive, however, and died a few days later.**