

County sees uptick in shark strandings

Two of state's three beached sharks were in Eastside Santa Cruz

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LIVE OAK » A young female white shark stranded near 24th Avenue on Aug. 17 — the third white shark stranding in California this year and the second in Santa Cruz County — was killed by a boat's propeller, according to necropsy results by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The more than 10 foot, 660 pound female shark died of a deep propel-

ler gash to the head, research scientist Mark Okihiro said. Okihiro conducted the necropsy, a postmortem examination to determine the cause of death.

"We think it was a healthy shark," Okihiro said. "We think it was near the surface and a boat going at high speed hit it. It died shortly after."

Okihiro said sharks occasionally will become interested by a running engine's magnetic field. He said he recently attended a conference and learned information about sharks' curiosity about boats.

"They'll sometimes nose in and, at the last minute, try to get out of the way," Okihiro said.

The shark stranded in Live Oak had its nose cut by the propeller and the second gash entered the animal's brain.

"It was the second cut that killed it," Okihiro said.

A subadult shark is "close to being an adult but not quite," Okihiro said. A subadult shark has underdeveloped reproductive organs, he said.

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A woman inspects a female subadult white shark stranded near 24th Avenue in Live Oak on Aug. 18. The shark died of a boat propeller injury to its head the night before.

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The shark's dorsal fin and many teeth had been removed after its death.

"It could have been somebody hunting for a souvenir," Okihiro said. He said beachgoers should not dismember a stranded shark.

"It has been a very unusual year with more shark strandings than normal," Okihiro said.

Every shark that gets stranded and dies in California is examined by Okihiro. This year, he has dissected more than a dozen leopard sharks, three white sharks, salmon sharks, a "couple of" soup-fin sharks and a seven-gill shark, he said.

The white shark strandings are abnormal, he said.

"Normally, there are no white-shark strandings," Okihiro said.

A young female white shark was stranded near Pleasure Point on April 7 and that fish soon died. That 9-foot, 10-inch fish weighed 672 pounds.

It had meningitis and damage to its liver and heart, Okihiro said.

"We still have samples to run on that shark," Okihiro said.

The other two strandings, including last week's stranding in Live Oak, were caused by boat strikes.

Okihiro said there is no simple reason for the uptick in white-shark strandings.

"You could only guess that it's because there's more juvenile and subadult white shark sightings," Okihiro said. "There are these fairly large aggregates of 6 to 10 foot sharks just outside the surf zone and they're feeding on stingrays. There's a greater possibility of their interaction with people."