

Dead dolphin in May River prompts concern, investigation

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Want to help? If you see the carcass in the May River, do not touch it. Report its location immediately to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration at 1-800-922-5431.

Bluffton resident Jimmy McIntire was fishing from his boat Tuesday afternoon when he noticed something unusual floating near Myrtle Island in the May River.

Piloting closer to investigate, he discovered a dead dolphin -- with a conspicuous bite taken out of it.

"It was definitely from a shark," he said. "Must have been quite a large one, too."

A few miles downriver -- in a marsh along Bull Creek near the Calibogue Sound -- he came across another dolphin carcass, this one badly decomposed.

"I'd only seen one (dead dolphin) my whole life before this," he said. "To see two in one afternoon, it just seemed very unusual."

McIntire quickly notified local authorities of his discovery, initiating an aquatic investigation that has, so far, raised more questions than it has resolved.

The only certainty so far is the location of the second dolphin. It was picked up Thursday by a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration worker, who will bring it to the agency's regional headquarters in Charleston for a necropsy.

Everything else -- the whereabouts of the other carcass, the causes of death, whether the deaths are related -- remains unknown.

Those answers, said wildlife biologist Wayne McFee, are of vital importance -- and they grow increasingly difficult to obtain with every minute the missing carcass spends in the river.

"One of the first things we look for in a carcass is signs of human interaction," McFee said, saying boat strikes, ingestion of litter, and entanglement in fishing line or netting are some of the most common causes of death in such dolphins.

The autopsies can also indicate emerging diseases affecting the mammals, he said, making the missing carcass's recovery critical for research.

He added that of about 50 carcasses found in coastal South Carolina each year -- 15 to 20 of which are delivered to his office from Beaufort County -- he's unable to determine a cause of death for about half because of decomposition.

The carcasses also can spread disease to humans who come into contact with them, he said.

All of which contributes to the sense of urgency Waddell Mariculture Center director Al Stokes says he feels on his recovery missions.

After striking out on two futile trips at low tide to locate the missing dolphin, Stokes said he hopes for better luck when he sets out this morning.

"We keep getting calls from people saying they've seen it, but by the time we get out there, the tides have taken it," he said, with a note of exasperation. "Things can move pretty fast in this current."

Stokes has been on similar missions before -- he says he recovers three or four carcasses a year on average -- and is prepared for the challenge this morning might bring.

"It's kind of like a game of hide and seek," he said. "And on the May River, there are a lot of places to hide."