Sperm Whale in Mobile Bay

IN LATE NOVEMBER, boater James West was fishing Mobile Bay when he spotted what he first thought was a long line of dolphins on the surface. Then he saw a plume of water shoot high into the sky, and he knew this was a whale, something you just don’t see in Mobile Bay—ever. He called it in.

It was a sperm whale, as it turned out, a male stranded in shallow water. After several days, researchers with the Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL) made the tough call to euthanize it. They determined that survival was unlikely, especially for a large whale some 100 miles from its natural depth in the Gulf of Mexico and that they wouldn’t be able to tow it to deeper waters without causing further injuries.

The whale measured 33.3 feet long. Expert labs around the country went to work analyzing tissue, organs, bones, and more to find out if the whale had infections, toxicity, or functional issues that would explain why it was stranded. In a typical year, only two sperm whales become stranded in the Gulf of Mexico but never yet in Mobile Bay.

NOAA Fisheries asks boaters to report sick, injured, entangled, stranded, or dead whales or dolphins by calling (877) 942-5343. Boaters can also download and use the NOAA Fisheries Dolphin and Whale 911 app. disl.edu; fisheries.noaa.gov

LANDMARK RED SNAPPER STUDY

Red snapper may be two to three times more plentiful in the Gulf of Mexico than thought. Researchers for the multi-year “Great Red Snapper Count” conducted by Harte Research Institute in Corpus Christi, Texas, discovered additional red snapper in low-relief habitat, many more than were previously counted.

Low-relief areas typically have muddy or sandy bottoms. But because most red snapper are caught in high-relief areas with natural and artificial reefs, those catches have dominated stock assessments and fishing regulations.

Chris Oliver, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries, called Harte’s $10 million research a scientific “landmark” and thanked Congress and Sea Grant for funding and ongoing support. He said NOAA will work with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council on possible adjustments to red snapper fishing regulations.

Gulf Coast Boat Shows

With warmer winter temperatures, Florida gets a head start for in-water boat shows. The leadoff hitter is the St. Petersburg Power and Sailboat Show January 14-17 at St. Pete’s downtown Municipal Marina and Albert Whitted Park. This is No. 43 which makes it the longest-running boat show on Florida’s West Coast. It’s usually held in early December, but from now on, organizers say it will take place in January. stpeteboatshow.com

The Naples Boat Show, January 21-24, has two locations—Naples City Dock and Naples Airport. You can go back and forth on a free shuttle. miacc.org/event/naples-boat-show

Pent-up demand for pleasure boats and accessories suggests good attendance, knock on fiberglass.

Below are some other Gulf Coast boat shows, not on the water.

Double-check before you go.

- Charlotte County Boat Show, January 7-10, Charlotte County Fairgrounds near Port Charlotte; goboatingflorida.com
- Biloxi Boat Show, February 5-7, Mississippi Coast Coliseum; gulfcoastshows.com
- Mobile Boat Show, February 26-28, Mobile Convention Center; gulfcoastshows.com
- Tampa Bay Boat Show, March 5-7, Florida State Fairgrounds; tampaBay.com