

Front Page

Posted: Aug 18, 2006

Manatee Sighting In Gansett Harbor Might Be First On Cape Cod

By **CHRISTOPHER KAZARIAN**

Falmouth is known for attracting tourists, but yesterday might have been a first in terms of one summer visitor.

This one was rather large, possibly 1,200 pounds, and roughly 10 feet long according to one eyewitness report.

Who was this strange guest?

It was a manatee, an endangered animal otherwise known as a sea cow. Common to the coastal waters in Florida, these herbivores are extremely rare around Cape Cod.

Sarah Herzig, coordinator for the Cape Cod Stranding Network, said, "We don't handle manatees much up here. As far as I know, we definitely [have not seen one] in the past eight years. I would hazard a guess that there has not been a manatee sighting up here ever."

The sighting happened while Brian VonHerzen of Carson City, Nevada, was swimming in Gansett Harbor. Mr. Von Herzen, an electronics consultant and professional videographer, is a longtime scuba diver and water enthusiast.

For the past month, he has been on vacation visiting his parents, Janice E. and R.P. VonHerzen of Gansett Road.

After a neighbor of his parents lost a wallet in the water, Mr. VonHerzen donned his wetsuit and began searching for it yesterday afternoon. He found the wallet, and he found something even larger.

At first glance, Mr. VonHerzen said, he thought he saw a stingray. It turned out to be the animal's tail.

"I was incredulous there was a manatee up here. It was amazing. It was less than 100 yards from Gansett Beach," he said.

Mr. VonHerzen has swum with manatees in Florida several times before yesterday's experience.

He said the manatees in Florida tend to be stationary, eating vegetation and remaining by the hot springs in southern waters. This manatee, he said, was more active.

For the next 15 minutes, Mr. VonHerzen swam alongside the creature. At one point, he was no more than three feet away from the manatee, at which point he could see the eyes, head, tail, and flippers, which he called "two small stubby arms." He also noticed a triangular notch on the left side of the manatee's tail.

Even though it seemed "pretty calm and happy," he said, he tried to keep a safe distance from the animal.

Periodically, the manatee would feed on eelgrass at the bottom of the harbor, he said. "It seemed to be robust and healthy," he said.

Several times, he said, the manatee came up to the surface to breathe.

Mr. VonHerzen called his nephews and brother-in-law over to a nearby dock, but they were unable to confirm the sighting.

However, John E. York of Bourne, whose 38' Crocker ketch was anchored in Gansett Harbor, saw the manatee as it crossed underneath the bow of his boat.

Mr. York, who is the brother of Mashpee Shellfish Warden Richard H. York, immediately called the Coast Guard to report the incident.

Both Robert Resendes, petty officer with the US Coast Guard, and Weatherly B. Dorris, owner of Quissett Harbor Boatyard, fielded calls from Mr. York regarding the incident. Ms. Dorris said that Mr. York had tracked the manatee from the mast of his boat. She said he was concerned that boaters would congregate in the area and possibly hit the animal by mistake.

The Dorris family has owned the boatyard for 48 years. Ms. Dorris has worked there for 25 years. In that time frame, she said, she has never seen or heard of a manatee sighting in the area.

Falmouth Department of Natural Resources Director Mark E. Patton, Assistant Director R. Charles Martinsen III, and officer Sarah M. Brooks were the first to respond to the scene. They were unable to find the mammal, but notified the stranding network.

After interviewing the two eyewitnesses, C.T. Harry, the assistant stranding coordinator for the network, said they believed their accounts to be credible.

Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Harry was joined by Matthew J. Dillon and Robert L. Spiro from the Harbor Master's office as they patrolled Gansett Harbor in search of the mammal. They were hoping to get a visual confirmation and wanted to take pictures and video of the manatee. "We are pretty confident there is a manatee out there," Mr. Harry said. "A few local boaters have seen the animal."

After an hour and a half of searching, Mr. Harry said, they were unable to find the mammal.

A little more than a week ago, a manatee was sighted in the Hudson River near New York City. Ms. Herzig said there is a possibility this could be the same one.

Manatees are accustomed to warm waters, she said. Currently, local temperatures are conducive for it to survive. Although they are large animals, they do not have a layer of blubber to protect them from colder water.

The mammals are not pelagic, Ms. Herzig said, which means they prefer to live in coastal waters. While not socially dependent, they are usually found in larger groups based upon their food source, which is typically sea lettuce, she said.

While Mr. VonHerzen speculated that global warming may have triggered this animal's trip up north, Ms. Herzig was more cautious. "I wouldn't attribute it to that. Infrequently, individuals will travel out of their range. We have not determined why that is," she said.

Two years ago a beluga whale was found dead on the coast of Portland, Maine, and other sightings have been reported as far south as Boston. The beluga whale is native to Arctic Waters, but Ms. Herzig said, "It just happened to travel out of its regular stomping ground."

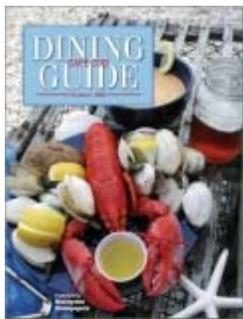
In terms of this mammal, she said, the biggest danger is boat propellers because they stay close to the surface and move slowly. "We don't want a lot of boaters to try and see this," she said.

If the manatee is found, she said, there is a possibility they will try to tag it.

"I am hoping [Mr. VonHerzen and Mr. York] are right. It would be a once-in-a-lifetime thing for us up here," she said. "For it to come up in our neck of the woods is impressive."

Mr. Harry said there is a strong likelihood the manatee will be seen again. If it is, he urged residents to call the stranding network at 508-743-9548. In addition, he said, it is crucial for the eyewitness to monitor the animal until an official from the network arrives to the scene.





(patience, please, large file)

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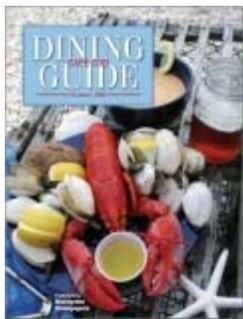
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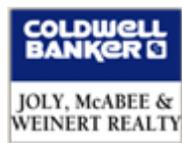
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