

Cotton

On Friday, April 29, 2005, the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies (IMMS) was called to respond to a rare event - a sub-adult male pantropical spotted dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*) was in need of help. Beach-goers noticed a dolphin trapped in the surf of Orange Beach, Alabama near Gulf Shores. The Orange Beach fire department transferred the dolphin to the calmer waters of Mobile Bay and called the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network organization, MarTerra. Dr. Regan, the coordinator, was able to stabilize the animal and called IMMS to help, because the Alabama network does not have a marine mammal stranding rehabilitation facility.

IMMS immediately sent a team of biologists, veterinarians, and marine mammal trainers to evaluate the dolphin. After conducting initial blood work to assess the dolphin's condition for travel and notifying the National Marine Fisheries Service, the IMMS team transported the dolphin to its facility in Mississippi on Saturday evening, April 30. The stranding team decided to name the dolphin Cotton after the name of the Bayou from which he was rescued.



Late Saturday evening, the spotted dolphin underwent an extensive medical examination, including x-rays, ultrasound, blood analysis, and bacterial cultures. The dolphin measured 5 feet, 8 inches long; and weighed 132 pounds. However, his test results did not yield findings that could explain his condition. Cotton suffered from an equilibrium problem which inhibited his ability to keep himself upright, so IMMS staff had to support him to keep his blowhole above water in order for him to breathe.

Unfortunately, despite the team's best efforts and medical care, Cotton died early Monday morning May 2, 2005. Cotton's body was taken to LSU Veterinary School for a complete necropsy, which is an autopsy for animals. By performing the necropsy, the veterinary students were able to learn about this species of dolphin. Several weeks after the necropsy, when the laboratory tests were completed, it was determined that Cotton died of a nasotrema parasitic infestation of the brain.

The pantropical spotted dolphin is a deep water dweller and a very understudied species. In the past, only a few pantropical spotted dolphins have survived in a rehabilitation facility in the US. This is the first live stranding of a pantropical spotted dolphin in this area that was treated by IMMS.