Written by Cindy Nevitt
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CAPE MAY POINT – Karen Cantwell and Eileen Turner have long histories of volunteering with animals, most of them of the four-legged kind.

Last weekend, the two Cape May County residents added sea animals to the long list of creatures they're willing to rescue as they signed up as first responders with the Marine Mammal Stranding Center. The Brigantine-based animal rescue operation, the only organization in the state licensed to handle marine mammals and sea turtles, needs volunteers throughout the state to respond to alerts of ill or injured sea animals, and occasionally holds training sessions for recruits.

Recently, MMSC education coordinator Sarah Miele and senior field technician Jay Pagel held such a session at Cape May Point State Park. Fourteen people who live within 20 minutes of the coast – the better to respond to alerts of sea turtles, seals, dolphins and whales in distress -- attended the two-hour presentation, which included a slide show and a demonstration of some of the center's rescue equipment.

"We're very involved with animal rehabilitation," said Turner, who has worked for 20 years with Steve Serwatka of New Jersey Nature, a nonprofit organization that rehabilitates injured animals. She also worked at a veterinary practice for 14 years, but left that job in 1981 when the demands of her own business became too great.

Turner, of Ocean View, also rescues horses whose owners are can't afford the upkeep of the animals, stabling them on her property while caring for them. Cantwell, of South Dennis, is a volunteer with the spay/neuter clinic at the Crest Haven Complex in Cape May Court House and is on the Board of Directors of the Animal Alliance of Cape May County.

Their previous exposure to sea creatures came earlier this year when they helped tag horseshoe crabs at Reeds Beach in Middle Township during the crustaceans' annual egg laying, when thousands of migrating birds gather to feast on the eggs.

They found the experience enjoyable and decided to offer their services to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center, which relies upon volunteers in the field to report eye-witness accounts of strandings and to help keep both beached animals and curious humans a safe distance apart.

What creatures strand themselves on New Jersey beaches

The busiest time of year for the MMSC is November to April, with seal season coming up, Miele said. The four types of seals encountered off New Jersey's coast are gray, harbor, harp and hooded, with the hooded seal the most aggressive of the four, although Pagel stressed any seal can cause harm if it feels threatened.

"They're a lot faster than you'd think," Pagel said of seals. "They move at 10 to 15 miles per hour, and they have a lot more traction in the sand than you do. If you get bit, you're probably going to lose whatever got bit because of disease and bacteria. They don't brush their teeth, you know."

Turtles, which are warm water creatures, keep the MMSC busiest in the summer. The four species of turtle found along the state's coast are loggerhead, green sea turtle, leatherback and Kemp's Ridley. Rescues of leatherbacks, which can grow to 6 feet long and weigh up to one ton, are restricted to the water because their size makes it impossible to transport them to the Brigantine facility.

"Do not get your fingers anywhere near their mouths, or you'll lose them," Pagel cautioned again. "Turtles can bite through clam shells and other shells for their food. Their jaws are really strong."

All sea turtles are endangered or threatened, Miele said, and strandings of any turtle, even a dead one, should be reported to the MMSC. Additionally, federal and state laws protect marine mammals and sea turtles from human interference, and allow for fines to be levied against those who handle the animals without federal or state authorization.

Dolphins, porpoises and whales also occasionally wash up in New Jersey. Bottlenose, common, striped, Risso's and Atlantic spotted dolphins are most likely to be seen off the coast, along with harbor porpoises.

Baleen whales such as the humpback, fin and minke are found in the waters along the Jersey Shore, and toothed whales such as pygmy sperm, pilot, sperm and beaked are found here. Rescues of all whales are done from the beach as the center's largest stretcher can accommodate a mammal a maximum of 11.5 feet in length.

"Whales and dolphins strand as a last-ditch effort to stay alive," Pagel said. "Unfortunately, we've had few success stories with them."

The center, which was established in 1978, has responded to more than 3,700 strandings in its 34-year existence, Miele said.

Role of volunteers

Volunteers are primarily responsible for relaying information, such as a description of the animal's condition, to the MMSC. Animals strand for a number of reasons, some human-caused – such as an injury from a boat strike or entanglement in a net – and some due to illness. Others are too young to be on their own.

"The cell phone camera is the greatest invention in our business," Pagel said. "Send us a picture so we can tell what we're looking at."

Once the MMSC has been contacted, volunteers are asked to remain with the animal and to keep curious onlookers at a safe distance, a recommended 100 feet. Acknowledging some beaches are not that wide, Pagel said a 50-foot buffer between the animal and people and their pets might be the best a volunteer can achieve.

Stranded animals should not be rolled, pushed back into the water, or pulled by their tails or

flippers. If an animal makes a move toward the water, let it go, Pagel said.

The training session at Cape May Point was the only one of three scheduled sessions able to be held this year, Miele said. One location was damaged by Sandy and another had a tree fall on it. Miele said she plans to schedule other sessions in other locations, and will begin taking the names of those interested in volunteering and training with the MMSC. For information, call 609-266- 0538.