

Lily's Story: Rescuing a Seal Pup

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The life of a baby gray seal is tough. Mother seals abandon their pups after just a few weeks, leaving the vulnerable offspring to fend for themselves—in an ocean full of danger and uncertainty. In April, one such pup, now famously known as Lily, was found laying on the shore near Bethany Beach, Del. It was a windy spring day and the staff and volunteers with the Marine Education Research and Rehabilitation Institute (MERR) couldn't tell what was ailing the seal pup.

“Our volunteers had been monitoring her and I went down to assess. It was a little hard initially, because the sand was blowing and we really couldn't see her all that well. She was moderately underweight, she didn't look great,” said Suzanne Thurman, director of MERR, which is based in Lewes, Del.

Thurman asked for the help of a local photographer and MERR volunteer who, using a zoom lens, was able to capture detailed images of the baby seal. The photos confirmed MERR's fears; the seal was suffering from a broken jaw and would need to be rescued. It was time for a carefully choreographed operation to begin. Thurman, along with volunteers, needed to place the seal into a rescue crate to safely transport her to the Institute. The first attempt failed, Lily scooted back into the ocean and rescuers were forced to move behind the dunes out of Lily's view. Luckily for the crew and for the injured baby seal, Lily eventually crawled into the rescue cage on her own, and was taken back to MERR for the start of her treatment. According to Thurman, “She needed a little coaxing to go completely into the crate, but all in all, she was the most accommodating seal MERR has ever rescued.”

Thanks to Lily's cooperation and the dedicated treatment from veterinarians, the seal pup survived the night and was taken to the Marine Animal Rescue Program at the National Aquarium in Baltimore the next day. Aquarium staffers were unsure of Lily's long-term prognosis when she arrived on Easter Sunday. “Her teeth were pointing in opposite directions, so once we identified the fractures, we were able to formulate a management plan for her as far as medications. It was a challenge to

come up with activities for her that wouldn't make her situation worse," said Jennifer Dittmar, manager of the National Aquarium's Marine Animal Rescue Program.

With proper care, her broken jaw was eventually able to heal on its own. Lily was fed a diet of herring and capelin during her stay at the rehabilitation center and was even taught to hunt in the wild with foraging activities.

Dittmar said, "When she came in, she was only about a month old and weighed about 35 pounds. She was at the age where she'd been weaned from her mom, but she hadn't yet learned to eat on her own. When she came to us she hadn't yet eaten solid foods so we actually had to teach her to eat solid food on her own, which is always a challenge."

Lily made a full recovery and gained 12 pounds while she was healing.

On June 9th, it was time for the seal to be reunited with her natural habitat—the Aquarium scheduled a morning release at Assateague State Park, just south of Ocean City, Md.

Curious onlookers started arriving on the beach an hour before the release was scheduled to occur. By 9:30 a.m., nearly 600 people had gathered around the path Lily would take from her crate to the Atlantic Ocean, excited to cheer on the pup who had become famous thanks to local media reports.

When the crate was opened, Lily hesitated for just a moment. Her timidity didn't last long though. As the crowd cheered, she made her way down to the water, splashed in and, for a few minutes, swam along the beach, giving her rescuers one last chance to say farewell. For her saviors, it was a bittersweet moment. As you can imagine, it's easy to become attached to an adorable baby seal, but her caregivers said they understand she belongs in the ocean.

"Some of our volunteers become attached to the animals, but I know that she's supposed to be out here and doing what she has to do as a gray seal and wild animal. It's not hard for me because what we're doing is helping her and it's been a great experience for me, to give back and make sure the seal is where she's supposed to be," said Dittmar.

Dittmar doesn't think Lily would have survived without the help of MERR and the National Aquarium, and says the gray seal now has a chance to live a full and

healthy life. She could eventually grow to 8 feet in length, weigh up to 550 pounds and live for 35 more years.

It's a happy ending for Lily and those to whom she owes her life.

According to Thurman, "For us to see a young seal, especially one that was just born this year to have a chance to live her life, is just very enjoyable. It's just a wonderful day, we'd love to see more success stories like this."

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