

Local & business



Strong signs of survival

PHOTOS COURTESY NOAA

Hawaiian monk seals and green sea turtles were observed by researchers this year at French Frigate Shoals in the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, about 1,500 miles northwest of Hawaii. More than a dozen field biologists conducted research on monk seals and sea turtles throughout the Northwestern Hawaii Islands since May.

Biologists find that monk seals and sea turtles are faring well in the Northwest isles

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A team of researchers recently returned to Honolulu with positive news on Hawaiian marine life in the remote Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument 1,500 miles northwest of Hawaii.

Hawaiian monk seal pups were born and mostly appeared healthy, while a large population of green sea turtles was seen at Tern Island.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's ship Oscar Elton Sette arrived in Honolulu Tuesday with more than a dozen field biologists who had been conducting research on Hawaiian monk seals and sea turtles at various isles since May.

Field researchers had set up camps at Kure Atoll, Pearl and Hermes Atoll, Lisianski Island, Laysan Island and French Frigate Shoals.

While there, they conducted daily seal surveys, tagged and measured recently weaned pups



Video is available at staradvertiser.com.

and disentangled some from nets and other marine debris.

This summer, they counted more than 140 Hawaiian monk seal pups in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which has been the average for the past few seasons.

The team also made a surprise

Scientists are awaiting results of DNA tests to confirm whether a pair of pups that recently finished weaning and appear to be about the same age are twins, a rarity among Hawaiian monk seals.

discovery — Hawaiian monk seal mom GV18 appeared to have given birth to twins.

Researchers observed GV18 at Lisianski Island, nursing a pair of pups about the same size. The pups weaned about midway through the season, according to research ecologist Stacie

Robinson. They were on the thinner side but appeared healthy.

The team is eagerly awaiting DNA test results to confirm that the pair — a boy and girl — are twins. The birth of Hawaiian multiple monk seal pups is exceptionally rare, and occurs in only 0.1% of all births, according to researchers.

In addition to seal surveys, experts on NWHI research trips also relocate weaned pups to better spots to increase their chances of survival and help seals in need of medical assistance, said Shawn Farry, a biological research associate and field team leader at French Frigate Shoals.

On this trip, the team brought back four malnourished monk seal pups to get care at the Marine Mammal Center's Ke Kai Ola hospital in Kailua-Kona. Years of data have shown that weaned, underweight pups have a low chance of survival, according to researchers.

The four female pups — two from Pearl and Hermes Reef and two from Lisianski Island — are now undergoing rehabilitation.

Researchers this year were also focused on assessing conditions at French Frigate

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Researchers aboard the NOAA vessel Oscar Elton Sette returned Tuesday from five months studying Hawaiian monk seals and green sea turtles at Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. On the pier at Ford Island in Pearl Harbor with the research vessel in the background are Shawn Farry, left, biological research associate with the Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program; Marylou Staman, research technician; Hope Ronco, biological research associate; Stacie Robinson, chief scientist; and Hector Casanova, commanding officer of the Oscar Elton Sette.

SEALS

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Shoals, which sustained major damage after Hurricane Walaka passed through in October, wiping out a significant reef and washing away East Island.

Farry, who has been participating in the field camps since 1993, said East Island is now reforming into a much smaller isle. Historically, East Island was one of the largest pupping sites, and monk seals are still pupping there.

A three-person sea turtle field research team also set out for the French Frigate Shoals, where an estimated 96% of Hawaiian green sea turtles migrate to reproduce.

Marylou Staman, research technician with NOAA's Marine Turtle Biology and Assessment Program, said the team identified and numbered 583 individual green sea turtles this season.

One female turtle, nicknamed Motherload, was outfitted with a satellite tag on Oahu's North Shore before she left for the North-

HELP NOAA RESEARCHERS

- >> Report sightings of green sea turtles from the NWHI by taking a photo from at least 10 feet, record the date, time, number on shell, and location. Email to respectwildlife@noaa.gov and share photos to social media with #honucount2019.
- >> Report sightings of sea turtles and monk seals in distress to NOAA's hotline at 888-256-9840.

western Hawaiian Islands so researchers could track where she laid eggs.

Motherload, or OA48, laid four large clutches on Tern Island, said Staman, and has already migrated back to her usual foraging grounds off of Oahu's North Shore.

Since East Island is no longer large enough, the team

and used small boats to survey turtles on East Island.

The island was large enough to encourage nesting among turtles, said Staman, but king tides washed over parts of the isle, and some eggs were observed washing out of the berm.

The turtles identified in the NWHI are likely now swimming around the main Hawaiian isles, and the research team is inviting the public to help track them by the letter-and-number combinations painted in nontoxic white paint on their shells.

At the same time, researchers remind the public to keep a respectful distance from wildlife. Hawaiian monk seals are a critically endangered species, with only about 1,400 remaining in the wild. Hawaiian green sea turtles are classified as threatened.

Through the camps, researchers have been able to compile some of the longest-running datasets for species conservation. It was the 38th field season for Hawaiian monk seals, and the 47th field season for