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Beached baby whale survives, but may never swim free again

By LISA FUSS

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STOCK ISLAND, Fla. — An orphan pygmy sperm whale found stranded last May in the Florida Keys has beaten the odds by simply staying alive and is likely to become the first of its kind to live permanently in captivity.

Marine mammal experts will decide soon whether Summer, a 205-pound, six-foot female whale discovered on a Key West beach, is eligible for release into the wild.

But the youngster already has two strikes against her, making her chances of returning to the Atlantic Ocean slim to none. The calf, who was never weaned by her mother, cannot forage for food, experts say, and possibly has a ruptured air sac on her blunt head.

Though a ruptured air sac isn't life-threatening in captivity, the injury makes

deep diving impossible. Pygmy sperm whales catch squid and jellyfish at depths of 800-plus feet.

If marine biologists rule that Summer isn't fit for freedom, the whale would swim in a class of her own. The 11-month-old would be the only rehabilitated pygmy sperm whale in captivity anywhere, an odds-defying feat that has the marine mammal rescue community buzzing.

"It's pretty remarkable that she's made it this far," said Miami Seaquarium director Robert Rose, who has seen countless tragic stories involving stranded pygmy sperm whales. "It's a case I'm certain everyone is going to watch closely, because it is such a first."

Dubbed Summer because of her discovery on the solstice, the small black whale has been kept recently in a protected cove at the City Electric System pier

on Stock Island. Doves of volunteers have kept vigil since that fateful night, tending to chores as tedious as removing seaweed from Summer's ocean pen.

Although the prognosis was poor because of the whale's age and initial health problems, Summer has stayed afloat, battling through a fungal infection in her blowhole and a high white-blood-cell count that some thought meant that she would die.

Becky Arnold, marine mammal rehabilitation director for Wildlife Rescue of the Florida Keys, says she was originally pessimistic about Summer's chances.

Pygmy sperm whales, the second-most common marine mammal species to strand in Florida — bottlenose dolphins are the most common — typically do not survive beyond a few weeks of beaching themselves, Arnold says. A handful of pygmy sperm whales beach themselves

in the Keys each year. Summer is the first to have survived.

Marine mammal experts have had little success rehabilitating pygmy sperm whales simply because so little is known about them. Unlike dolphins that swim in pods close to shore, pygmy sperm whales pair up and stay in deep ocean waters beyond the edge of the continental shelf. With sightings rare, humans have only been able to study the narrow-jawed whales when the animals are ill or dead.

Federal authorities are weighing Summer's future. Summer is scientists' best shot at being able to study a live, healthy pygmy sperm whale. Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota is caring for an adult pygmy sperm whale that recently stranded, but the prognosis is poor.

Blair Mase, stranding coordinator for the National Marine Fisheries Service,

insists that a decision to keep the whale in human care is a last resort.

"The goal of rehabilitation always is to return them to their environment, but sometimes, as it appears in this case, that is not always possible," said Mase, who is monitoring Summer's progress on behalf of the government. "She's still nursing, and she's never learned to forage in the wild on her own. ... Sending her back out there at this point could be like taking a small child away from its mother and saying, 'Now go fend for yourself.'"

A final decision on Summer's fate is weeks away. The University of Hawaii has offered to adopt Summer and place her in a deep-water lagoon at its marine research facility. Mase says the offer will be considered, as will others.

"It's got to be the right situation," Mase said. "We want it all to be perfect after how far Summer has come."