

Johnny Morris
WONDERS OF WILDLIFE
NATIONAL MUSEUM &
AQUARIUM

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**No Room at the Inn: Rescued Sea turtles
flown to land-locked Missouri for Christmas miracle**

*Endangered loggerheads will receive care at Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium
after record year for turtle strandings*



Springfield, Mo. – 12 endangered loggerhead sea turtles who stranded on the beaches of Cape Cod were in desperate need of a Christmas miracle when they found an unlikely refuge more than 1,200 miles from the ocean. With sea turtle rehabilitation centers along the Eastern Seaboard already at capacity following a record year for strandings, Johnny Morris' Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium in Springfield, Missouri partnered with officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in an unprecedented effort to fast-track permitting and become the Midwest's first and only sea turtle rescue, rehabilitation and release center.

Just in time for Christmas, the turtles took flight aboard private aircraft provided by Turtles Fly Too on a nearly five-hour plane ride from Boston to Springfield on Tuesday. Upon arrival, the Wonders of Wildlife team transported them to the not-for-profit Aquarium's Sea Turtle Center, where more than a dozen animal care experts including veterinarians and marine biologists began providing around-the-clock care. After receiving a physical exam, the reptiles began settling into their new home: a 16,000-gallon backstage recovery pool where they will receive treatment until they are strong enough to be released, typically around 12 weeks.

Because cold-stunned turtles are often vulnerable to other long-term effects such as pneumonia, each animal will receive a customized care and treatment plan based on their condition. Key components include gradually warming the animals back to a stable body temperature and ensuring they are able to eat and swim normally.

As in any hospital setting, care is administered with the goal that each of the turtles will make a full recovery and can be safely released back into the wild.

“Johnny Morris founded Wonders of Wildlife in his hometown of Springfield, Missouri to inspire midwestern kids and families to care about conserving wildlife around the world, and rescuing these sea turtles is a great example of his conservation vision in action,” said Bob Ziehmer, Senior Director of Conservation at Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s. “The expert team at Wonders of Wildlife will provide the turtles with incredible care – and plenty of genuine Ozarks hospitality – throughout their stay and recovery.”

From the Ocean to the Ozarks

Each summer, migrating sea turtles forage in coastal habitats along northeastern shores before moving on to warmer waters in the fall. However, geological features like Cape Cod’s hook-shaped peninsula leave some turtles disoriented and unable to continue on their migration.



When temperatures sink below 50 degrees, hypothermia sets in and hundreds of turtles begin washing up on Massachusetts beaches in an annual phenomenon known as cold stunning.

2020 is now the largest live stranding year on record, with more than 750 live cold-stunned sea turtles rescued off beaches so far, and the most ever admitted to rehabilitation facilities. Beyond the historic stranding numbers, the season presented major challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic requiring additional safety protocols and causing some rehabilitation facilities to close their doors.



As rehabilitation centers on the East Coast began reaching capacity, officials from the National Marine Fisheries Service, a division of NOAA, reached out to Wonders of Wildlife for help.

“With a record number of live sea turtle strandings on beaches this year, we began running out of options for long-term care. A sea turtle rehabilitation center in Missouri is unprecedented, and we are grateful to Wonders of Wildlife for generously opening their doors to help us in this united effort to protect sea turtles for future generations,” said Kate Sampson, NOAA Fisheries sea turtle stranding and disentanglement coordinator for the Greater Atlantic Region.



Facilities must meet strict requirements put in place by NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in order to rehabilitate sea turtles. Officials closely review the infrastructure of life support systems, vet the experience of the animal care team, and confirm a facility has appropriate funding before issuing a permit. Thanks in part to a grant from the Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s Outdoor Fund, Wonders of Wildlife was able to secure funding and permits in a record matter of days, a process that typically takes two years.

The 12 turtles were first recovered along beaches in Massachusetts by MASS Audubon Wellfleet Bay Marine

Sanctuary volunteers before being taken to the New England Aquarium's Animal Care Center, one of several triage facilities in the northeast that provides temporary holding until NOAA can arrange a permanent placement.

A rescue flight was then coordinated by Turtles Fly Too, a nonprofit organization that coordinates general aviation transportation for endangered species to licensed facilities like aquariums and other nonprofit rehabilitation centers. Tuesday's mission to Springfield marked the organization's 20th flight of the fall season, having transported more than 650 turtles so far. In addition to Turtles Fly Too, a vast network of private organizations including the New England Aquarium and MASS Audubon Wellfleet Bay Marine Sanctuary work tirelessly to protect endangered species in conjunction with NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Due to the festive timing of the turtles' arrival, the Aquarium has decided to name them after Santa's reindeer. Though the Sea Turtle Center at Wonders of Wildlife is not open to visitors, the public can keep up with the health and recovery of Prancer, Dancer, Donner, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blitzen, Rudolph, Clarice, Olive, and one more turtle, who has yet to be named, on the Aquarium's website and social media channels. Two previously rescued green sea turtles who were unable to be released back to the wild are on display at the Aquarium's Great Oceans Hall exhibit, located inside the main entry hall. For more information, visit www.wondersofwildlife.org/seaturtles.

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About Johnny Morris' Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium

Johnny Morris' Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium consists of an all-new 1.5-million-gallon Aquarium Adventure showcasing 35,000 live fish, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and birds, and immersive Wildlife Galleries that bring visitors eye-to-eye with the greatest collection of record-setting game animals ever assembled. Created by noted conservationist and Bass Pro Shops founder/CEO Johnny Morris, the 350,000-square-foot experience celebrates those who hunt, fish, and act as stewards of the land and water. Located next to Bass Pro Shops National Headquarters in Springfield, Missouri the campus is a centerpiece of America's Conservation Capital in Missouri's Ozark Mountains. Wonders of Wildlife has been voted "Best New Attraction in America" and "America's Best Aquarium" by the readers of *USA TODAY*. For more information, visit www.wondersofwildlife.org.

About the Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund

Under the visionary leadership of founder Johnny Morris, Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's is leading North America's largest conservation movement. Together with our partners in conservation, we're positively shaping the future of the outdoors through donations, grant-making and advocacy. The 501c3 Outdoor Fund raises funds to support conservation efforts by activating more than 200 million passionate sportsmen and women rounding up their purchases in Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's stores and online.

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