

BON VOYAGE!

Friends Of The Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center Is Bidding A Fond Farewell To Three Very Special Flipped Friends

Laguna Beach, CA – Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center (FSLMMC) announced today that it is preparing to transport **three hand-reared California sea lion pups** to a permanent home at the **Oklahoma City Zoo** in mid-December. The three pups, **Pearl**, **Xander**, and **Gilligan**, are unique because, generally when pups are successfully rehabilitated at FSLMMC, they are released. “Because these three animals required hand-rearing (bottle feeding), they have become dependent on humans and are deemed unreleasable by National Marine Fisheries Service,” says Michele Hunter, Director of Operations/Animal Care, “This is a very unusual occurrence for us. We raised one hand-reared pup last year, Jonah, and we have only had two other unreleasable animals in the 33-year history of our organization.”

Each pup has a unique story behind it and all three initially struggled for survival. **Pearl**, the female pup, was born on May 19, 2003 at FSLMMC. Her mother was suffering from extreme neurological dysfunction caused by domoic acid poisoning and Pearl was born prematurely, weighing only 12 pounds at birth. The average birth weight for California sea lions is 15-20 pounds. Unfortunately, Pearl’s mother did not survive, and Center staff was responsible for the round-the-clock care of the tiny pup. Initially, the animal was tube-fed milk replacement formula every 4 hours, and then, 17 days later on June 5, she fed from the bottle for the first time. Initially, her weight gain was slow, but she now weighs 66 pounds and is a healthy and playful California sea lion pup.

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Xander, the larger male pup, was rescued on June 2, 2003. He was found face down on the large rocky outcropping at Crescent Bay. It is likely that he was born that day because his umbilical cord was fresh. “We suspected that something was wrong because the mother had not been sighted and it is not common for California sea lions to leave their pups within the first couple of days after birth and for them to give birth on rocks. They generally like to find a nice sandy beach to give birth to their pups,” says Hunter. Xander weighed 18 pounds upon arrival at the Center. He wasn’t about to let Pearl show him up with the bottle-feeding though. He fed from the bottle for the first time on June 6. Although Pearl is older, Xander is definitely larger...he now weighs 86 pounds.

Gilligan, the third hand-reared pup, also a male, came on the scene a bit later. He was rescued on August 15 from the beach at the Montage Resort & Spa in Laguna Beach with, again, no mother in sight, and arrived at the Center weighing 24.5 pounds. It is suspected that he was approximately one to two months old based on his size and based on the fact that typical pupping season is in June. Gilligan initially suffered from respiratory problems, which were treated at the Center, and he is now healthy and weighs 43 pounds. Hand-rearing is necessary to the survival of orphaned pups of such a young age. California sea lions are extremely maternal animals and the females nurse their pups for approximately five to six months and at times up to one year.

“We are thrilled that the pups are going to have a permanent home at the Oklahoma City Zoo. The facility has a wonderful reputation and I know that all three of them will thrive there,” says Hunter. Hunter will be accompanying the pups on their journey to Oklahoma City along with Beate Litz, FSLMMC Education Director. Hunter admits, “Of course, I will miss them greatly. Usually, we have a hands-off policy with the animals and, with the close contact and long hours we have spent, these pups have really worked their way into our hearts.”

About Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center:

Established in 1971, Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center is among the forerunners in marine mammal rehabilitation science. The Center's founding precluded the institution of the Marine Mammal Protection Act by one year. The first organization of its kind in the state of California, FSLMMC shares the responsibility for the rescue and rehabilitation of marine mammals on California's coastline with only six other organizations. FSLMMC is the designated holding facility for stranded cetaceans in Orange and Los Angeles Counties. Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center is a non-profit organization with a mission to rescue, medically treat, and rehabilitate pinnipeds and cetaceans that strand along the Orange County coastline due to injury or illness; to release healthy marine mammals back to their natural habitat while preserving species diversity; and to increase public awareness of the marine environment through education and research.

About the Oklahoma City Zoo:

Celebrating 100 years in 2004, the Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden is consistently recognized as one of the finest zoos in the country and is the oldest zoo in the Southwest. With many of the world's most exotic animals showcased throughout 110 lushly planted acres, the zoo is fully accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and the American Association of Museums. State-of-the-art, spacious and naturalistic habitats mixed with historical architecture provide an exciting adventure for guests and comfortable, safe environments for animals. The protection and propagation of wildlife and wild places through field conservation projects, educational programs, and stimulating, fun experiences are the primary goals of the Zoo.

Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center is located in the large red barn at 20612 Laguna Canyon Road. The Center and gift shop are open to the public from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. daily. For more information please contact Emily Wing or Michele Hunter 949.494.3050 or visit Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center on the web at www.fslmmc.org.