



BLUFFTON TOWNSHIP FIRE DISTRICT

& Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Dolphin Named “Lucky” Rescued from Bluffton Lagoon in Unforgettable Multi-Agency Effort

BLUFFTON, SC – A dolphin named Lucky is once again swimming free in the May River thanks to a coordinated and compassionate rescue by the Bluffton Township Fire District (BTFD), the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network (LMMN), and local Bluffton residents on Saturday, July 12, 2025.

The 238 cm (approximately 7 feet, 10 inches) female dolphin was discovered stranded in a shallow tidal lagoon inside the Hampton Lake community. The dolphin, known to researchers at the University of South Carolina Beaufort (USCB) who track area dolphins, was recognized by distinctive markings as “Lucky”—a name she lived up to during this dramatic rescue.

It is believed that Lucky swam into the lagoon through a culvert connecting to the May River during Thursday’s heavy rains and high tides. As the tide receded, she became trapped in shallow waters just 2–3 feet deep. A passerby noticed the distressed dolphin and contacted a neighbor familiar with wildlife response, who helped alert the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network, which is federally authorized to respond to marine mammals in South Carolina by NMFS and the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding and Response Program. It is otherwise illegal to handle marine mammals without authorization.

LMMN received the call at 12:15 p.m. and deployed a team from Charleston, including Lauren Rust (Executive Director), Tracy Kowalczyk, John Kane, and local volunteer Amber Kuehn. Once on scene, the team determined they would need additional help to safely secure and transport the dolphin. At 3:45 p.m., they contacted BTFD for support.



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Rescue 335 responded shortly after 4:00 p.m., deploying firefighters specially trained in technical water rescue as part of South Carolina Regional Response Team 4. Working alongside the LMMN team and residents Michael Smith and Thomas Layer, crews attempted to corral the dolphin using a specially designed marine rescue tarp with stabilizing poles. Although Lucky initially swam farther into the lagoon, the team regrouped and eventually guided her safely onto the tarp.

Together, the team carried Lucky approximately 75 yards through shallow water and up a steep embankment, not an easy task as Lucky weighs between 400-500 pounds. She was then placed onto a utility trailer provided by Ms. Kuehn, who coordinates turtle rescues on Hilton Head Island, and transported under fire department escort to a private dock in May River Plantation, about 2-3 miles away. The dolphin was released into deeper water in the river just before 6:00 p.m.

“This was a textbook example of interagency teamwork and calm under pressure,” said Lauren Rust, Executive Director of LMMN. “From our trained responders to the Bluffton firefighters and helpful community members, everyone played a vital role in ensuring Lucky’s safe return home.”

BTFD personnel on scene included:

Lt. Jeffrey Smith – Incident Command & Acting Battalion 38 Chief
Senior Firefighter Dave Adams – Battalion Aide

Rescue 335 Crew:

Driver/Operator Brandon Driscoll
Driver/Operator Tony Crosetto
Senior Firefighter Aaron Angel

The entire event was captured on video and in photos by BTFD and will be released today on the Fire District’s official social media platforms and website. News outlets interested in high-resolution images or footage should contact the Public Information Office.

Public Safety Reminder

If a dolphin or other marine mammal is spotted and believed to be in distress, do not approach or attempt to help. Call 911 immediately. Marine mammals are protected under federal law, and only authorized organizations like LMMN may respond to stranding events. Even well-intentioned interference can put both people and the animals at risk.

How the Public Can Help Protect Marine Mammals

The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network encourages the public to follow these guidelines to protect dolphins and other marine mammals in our region:



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- **REPORT** stranded or injured marine mammals (alive or deceased) to the SCDNR Wildlife Stranding Hotline: **1-800-922-5431**
- **DO NOT APPROACH** or try to push a stranded dolphin back into the water. These are wild, potentially sick animals.
- **DO NOT HARASS** marine mammals. Disturbing a dolphin—even unintentionally—can result in federal fines of up to **\$100,000**.
- **KEEP YOUR DISTANCE:** Stay **at least 50 yards** away by boat and **15 yards on land**.
- **NEVER FEED** marine mammals. It disrupts natural behaviors and can lead to injury or death.
- **CLEAN UP** trash and marine debris. Marine mammals can mistake litter for food, leading to illness or death.

To learn more about marine mammal protection or to volunteer with LMMN, visit:

🔗 <https://www.lowcountrymarinemammalnetwork.org/volunteer>

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Image Notes:

All photos credit – BTFD/Stephen Combs

All photos showing the handling of the dolphin must include the following: *LMMN is federally authorized to respond to marine mammals in South Carolina by NMFS and the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding and Response Program. It is otherwise illegal to handle marine mammals without authorization.

2465 – Dolphin Rescue team carrying “Lucky” through lagoon.

2516 – Rescue team offloading “Lucky” at private boat dock in May River Plantation.

2566 – Members of the relocation team from left to right: Michael Smith (neighbor in Hampton Lake), Tracy Kowalczyk (Marine Mammal Stranding Technician), Senior Firefighter Aaron Angel, BTFD Driver/Operator Tony Crosetto (with BTFD hat), John Kane (LMMN Volunteer – hat turned backwards), Jane Rust (Executive Director LMMN – front center), BTFD Driver/Operator Brandon Driscoll, Amber Kuehn (long-sleeved light blue shirt – Turtle Rescue volunteer), Thomas Layer (black T-shirt – volunteer).

About the Bluffton Township Fire District

The Bluffton Township Fire District provides fire suppression, technical rescue, EMS first response, and community risk reduction services to more than 246 square miles of southern Beaufort County, South Carolina. The District proudly supports regional emergency response partnerships and responds to over 9,000 calls annually.



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About the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network

The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network (LMMN) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to protecting marine mammals through science, outreach, education, and conservation. LMMN holds federal authorization to respond to marine mammal strandings and leads volunteer engagement in monitoring and rescue efforts across South Carolina's coast.