

A Blainville's beaked whale stranded in the Canary Islands due to an attack of Killer whale with a review of the strandings of the species in the archipelago



Francesca Fusar Poli¹, Manuel Carrillo², Marisa Tejedor³, Carla Fiorito⁴, Manuel Arbelo⁴, Antonio Fernández⁴, Vidal Martín¹

¹Sociedad para el Estudio de los Cetáceos en el Archipiélago Canario (SECAC), ²Canarias Conservación, ³Urb. Faro Pechiguera, nº 155, Pl. Blanca, CP 35580 Yaiza, Lanzarote, ⁴Instituto Universitario de Sanidad Animal (IUSA).

INTRODUCTION

The Blainville's beaked whale (*Mesoplodon densirostris*) is a cetacean that is scarcely known, being listed as "Least Concern" (LC) by the IUCN.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 4 April 2021, an adult female Blainville's beaked whale stranded in La Guirra (Antigua) on the island of Fuerteventura, on a stretch of coast integrated in the MPA Site of Community Importance (SCI) "Marine area of the east and south of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura". It was missing its caudal peduncle and had post-mortem shark bites, as well as linear scars compatible with killer whales (*Orcinus orca*). The necropsy was performed by IUSA veterinarians and a biological study by SECAC. The provisional diagnosis of death was trauma of unknown origin.

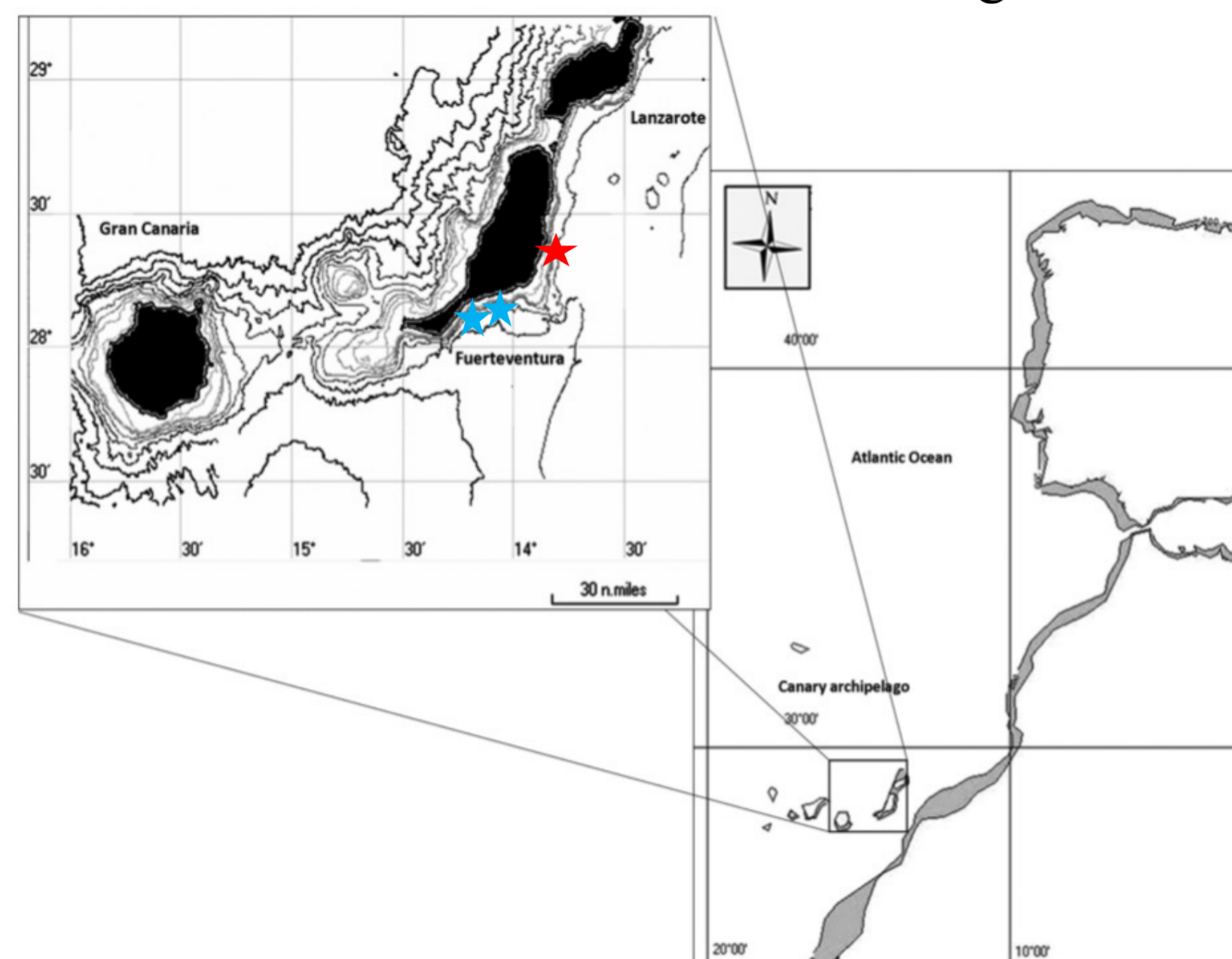


Figure 1. Map of the eastern Canary Islands showing the positions of the sightings (blue stars) and animal stranded (red star).

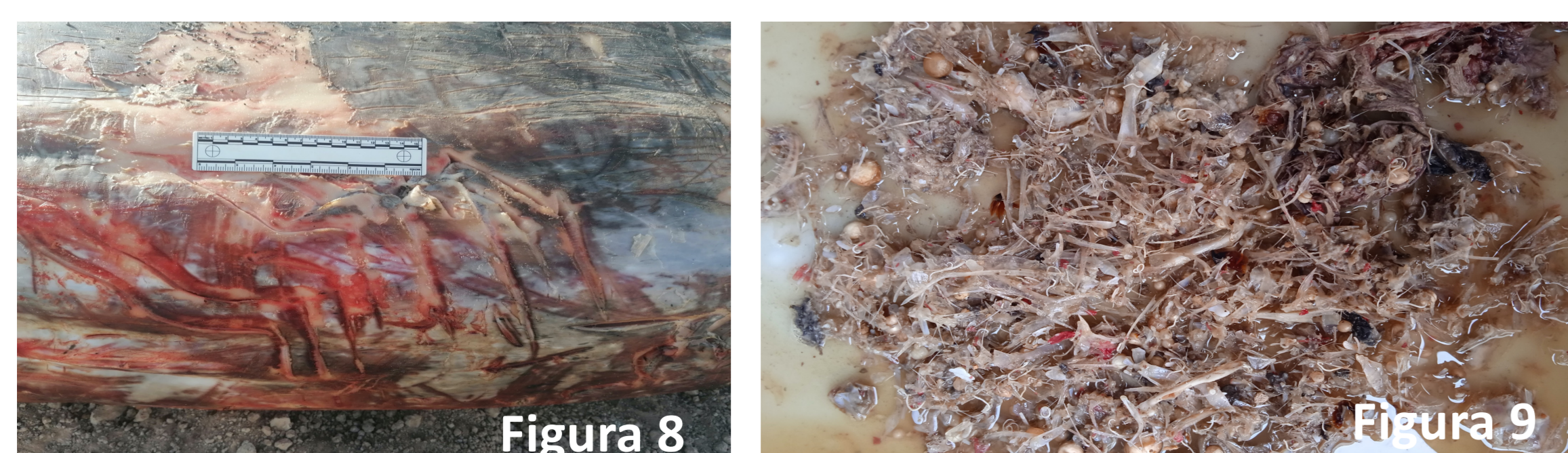


Figure 9. Abundant stomach contents consisting of fish, cephalopods and crustaceans.

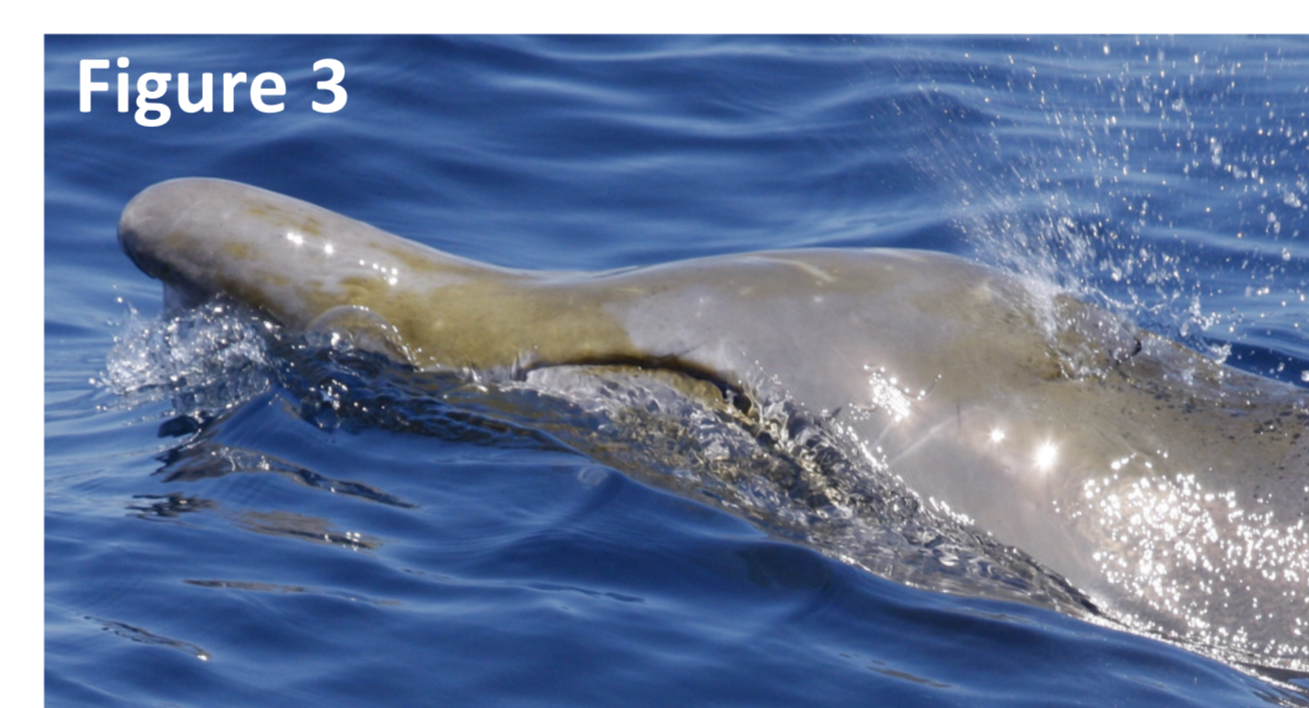
Figure 7. Specimen stranded Md 008.

Figure 8. Killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) tooth rakes.

Figure 9. Abundant stomach contents consisting of fish, cephalopods and crustaceans.

RESULT

This individual was part of a small resident population of Blainville's beaked whales from Fuerteventura and had been photographically identified at sea (code Mde 008) 18 years earlier as part of a SECAC tracking and photo-identification programme. This specimen had a characteristic deformity of the lower jaw (Fig. 2,3 and 4) as a result of an old traumatism that apparently did not affect its survival, as in addition to a good physical condition, it had abundant stomach contents with remains of fish, crustaceans and cephalopods, showing that it was feeding normally. Histological examination of the ovaries revealed a possible senescent condition.



REVIEW OF THE STRANDINGS

Between 1983 and 2022, 17 specimens of Blainville's beaked whales have stranded on the coasts of the Canary Islands. Strandings have been registered along all months indicating a year-round presence in this archipelago. Concerning the age and sex classes, in the sample domains the mature animals (70%). The longest animal (n=17) was a 435 cm female. The smaller sexually mature male was 414 cm and female was 417 cm. The longest fetus was 162 cm. The smaller calf was 149 cm (35 Kg). A 149 cm long and 35 Kg male, after stranding, was brought to a maintenance pool where it survived for 34 hours. Its necropsy revealed an incomplete development of the organs, suggesting that it was a premature animal.

CONCLUSION

This case exemplifies the value of integrative science in the study of cetaceans by combining information from different approaches such as at-sea monitoring programmes and stranding networks (from both health and biological perspectives) to clarify uncertainty relevant to the management of these species and the Marine Protected Area.