Civil Air Support Flight In Vain As Mass Stranding of Pilot Whales Reaches Tragic Conclusion

Monday 17 July, 2023

Civil Air Support were alerted to the mass stranding of a pod of 55 pilot whales near Stornoway on Sunday morning. British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) mobilised specialist Marine Mammal Medics with the skills and equipment needed to assist local experts already at the scene, but the logistics of getting them from their mainland bases to the site of the stranding were complex and challenging.

Recognising the urgency of the situation, a twin-engine Cessna 414 of the Civil Air Support fleet departed Turweston at 10:45, collecting a BDMLR Medic and equipment in Newcastle and Dundee before departing on its final leg towards the Isle of Lewis.

Sadly, the rescue party realised the race against time was lost when news reached the aircraft that almost all the pilot whales had died, as it approached Loch Ness just 90 miles short of Stornoway. Civil Air Support pilot Graham Mountford who had kindly donated his time and aircraft for this mission had no alternative other than to return to Turweston via Newcastle.

Adult Long-finned pilot whales can grow up to 2,300 Kg and reach a body length of up to 6.5 metres making them extremely difficult to rescue once they become stranded. With communications limited on the Isle of Lewis and the location difficult for emergency responders to reach, the probability of a successful rescue was always slight. Despite their best efforts, BDMLR were ultimately able to refloat only 1 of the pilot whales.

Whilst tragic, the stranding of whole pods of pilot whales is not an entirely uncommon phenomenon. They are a particularly social species and stay together as a group with offspring remaining in their mother's pod for a lifetime. It's known that strandings sometimes occur when one whale is injured and becomes beached, and the remainder of the pod stay close to provide protection and support. This is thought to have been the case in Stornoway as one of the female cetaceans is known to have suffered a prolapsed vagina. An extremely distressing event in any case, this almost human tendency to support a family member in need with which we can all identify adds a deeper layer of sadness.

CAS would like to extend our thanks to all who participated in supporting the mission including ground staff and handling agents at Turweston Aerodrome, Newcastle Airport and Dundee Airport. The charity is only able to function because its crews donate their time and aircraft free of charge, and with the support of those airports and associated providers who waive fees and charges for our humanitarian flights.

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About Civil Air Support (CAS) https://www.civilairsupport.com/

Charity registered in England and Wales (1113079) and Scotland (SCO42026)

Civil Air Support is the largest charitable air support organisation in Europe with around 200 members, together with a fleet of privately-owned aircraft. All Civil Air Support members are volunteers, and all flights are private. The primary mission of Civil Air Support is to provide voluntary air support to safeguard communities and the environment. Civil Air Support will only operate when the alternative is no air support at all. Civil Air Support assistance sorties are provided free of charge.

About British Divers Marine Life Rescue https://bdmlr.org.uk

BDMLR's mission is to provide assistance to marine mammals and other species in need of help. The charity does this through the training of specialist volunteer Marine Mammal Medics, which provides them with the basic knowledge, skills and expertise to enable teams to respond to callouts and act on behalf of the animal's best welfare interests.

BDMLR callouts vary enormously and may include (for example) providing advice over the phone about a seal reported by a concerned member of the public to a full blown environmental disaster such as an oil spill. The charity has Medics and various pieces of specialised equipment located around the UK coast and works with rehabilitation centres and experts in many fields of animal rescue, rehabilitation, science and welfare.

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