

# Manatee found in Mississippi River, then lost, remains mystery to experts

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

On Oct. 27 authorities called off the rescue of the manatee that had swum all most 750 miles up the Mississippi River all the way to Memphis — by then, the creature had vanished. That action ended a most unusual story in the annals of this species.

The story began on Oct. 23 when some fishers reported the sighting of a large animal off the river banks of Memphis. As soon as the animal was identified as a manatee by the personnel of Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency and the Memphis Zoo, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was informed since manatees, like any other marine mammal species, are protected under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Species Endangered Act.

The manatee was herded into Wolf River Cove, where the water is shallow and

warmer than other parts of the river. There the animal was monitored by the Memphis Police Harbor Patrol and Tennessee wildlife employees and was fed cabbage leaves.

The length of the animal was estimated as 10 feet and its weight between 900 and 1,000 pounds, both a little below average.

The "Save the Manatee Club" offered financial assistance and the Manatee Rescue Team from Sea World in Orlando, Fla., arrived expecting to rescue the animal. The Sea World team is the most experienced in the world in this kind of rescue.

The animal was quickly nicknamed Manny by the locals and became the center of attention for both the public and the media.

The appearance of the manatee this far north and at this time of year was a very unusual occurrence. Although manatees are essentially coastal creatures, they

sometimes venture inland. Yet its presence nearly 750 miles north from the Gulf Coast waters is unheard of, particularly in the fall when waters cool.

Also it is quite surprising to find this animal swimming upstream a river like the Mississippi that has been so impacted by human activities and that lacks the kind of aquatic grasses they usually feed on.

Manatees are very sensitive to water temperature. During the summer manatees can be seen as far north as Rhode Island, and sightings go as far west as Texas. But in winter they migrate to the Sunshine State where many of them concentrate around power plants located along the coasts. Those power plants use water as a coolant; when that water returns to the ocean, it is several degrees warmer than the surrounding sea.

Manatees usually moved away from waters cooler than 70 degrees Fahrenheit.



Aldemaro Romero | Special to The Sun

**Michel Conner, a graduate student at Arkansas State University, examines the skull of a West Indian manatee.**

That was approximately the temperature in the waters of the Mississippi around Memphis at the time that Manny vanished, probably swimming back to the ocean.

In addition to low temperatures and red tides (blooms of poisonous algae), the main causes of mortality for these animals are strikes by boats, drowning or crushing in navigation locks or flood-control

gates, entanglement in fishing gear, ingestion of foreign material such as fish hooks or plastic, and vandalism. Despite regulations, hunting pressure was strong until the '30s and '40s, and poaching continues, particularly in remote areas of Florida and Georgia. Habitat alteration has also been a matter of serious concern.

It is believed that there are

only a few hundred manatees left in the U.S. waters. That is why every single animal counts.

For more information contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at [biology@astate.edu](mailto:biology@astate.edu).

Romero is chairman and professor at the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State University.