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## **Over 20 Rehabilitated Manatees Return to Florida Waters After Several Years of Rehabilitation**

*The Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership just released over 20 manatees back to their Florida waters*

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### **ORLANDO, Fla. (February 18th, 2026):**

Multiple rehabilitated manatees have been returned to their native Florida waters following several years of care through the Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP). For animals that began their journeys as vulnerable orphans and young manatees in need of long-term support, the releases mark a significant milestone.

The MRP is a cooperative group of non-profit, private, state, and federal entities that work together to rescue, rehabilitate, release, and monitor sick and injured manatees. Most of the manatees were originally rescued as small orphans or young animals affected by cold stress syndrome between 2022 and 2025 by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and MRP partners. Over the course of their rehabilitation, organizations including SeaWorld Orlando, ZooTampa at Lowry Park, The Seas with Nemo & Friends at EPCOT, the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, Brevard Zoo, Georgia Aquarium, Clearwater Marine Aquarium, Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute (CMARI), The Bishop Museum of Science and Nature, Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium, Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters, Zoo Miami, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the University of Florida, and Save the Manatee Club worked together to provide the long-term care needed to prepare these manatees for return to the wild.

The manatees were released at warm water sites in Florida, including Blue Spring State Park in Orange City, Crystal River, Warm Mineral Springs, and the TECO Apollo Beach power plant, where wild manatees congregate this time of year. Under the terms of their contract for services with the Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership, Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute (CMARI) will tag and monitor MRP-sponsored manatees following their release.

These expert monitoring efforts by CMARI help support a successful transition back to the manatees' native range while alerting MRP partners if additional support may be needed. Every manatee returned this winter that is considered "naive" and does not yet have the necessary experience in the wild will be fitted with a GPS tracking device that allows researchers to monitor movements and acclimation to their natural habitat over the next year.

The MRP reminds those who may see a tagged manatee from their dock or while boating not to approach, follow, or interact with these animals, and not to tamper with the tracking gear. Young manatees with little experience in the wild must learn critical survival skills, including where to find warm water during winter, as well as food and shelter.

"The gear we deploy on manatees allows CMARI to monitor a manatee's movement and behavior. When an animal loses their tracking gear, we have no way to provide assistance or rescue needs if they become sick or are not adapting back into the wild. Their monitoring gear is their lifeline during this vital phase of recovery," said Monica Ross, Director of Manatee Research and Conservation with the Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute.

"These releases are the reason we do what we do. In the year that manatees Vora, Lilypad and Orchid were here, they each gained more than 250 pounds, with Orchid gaining almost 400 pounds. Our job is to get them to a releasable weight, and that is what we did. The manatees ate approximately 60,240 lbs. of lettuce during their stay at the Cincinnati Zoo, and we are so excited to see them start the next chapter of their lives swimming in their native Florida waters," said Lindsay Garrett, Manatee Springs keeper at the Cincinnati Zoo.

"Manatees are an iconic species in Florida, and their conservation affects us all. As these sea cows continue to face significant threats to their survival, it is more important than ever that we dedicate our time, energy, and resources to securing their future," said Tiffany Burns, Senior Director of Animal Programs at ZooTampa and President of the MRP. "Providing critical care to this incredible species benefits our state's ecosystem. We are grateful for the unwavering commitment of MRP member organizations. Their dedication enables us to rescue, rehabilitate, and safely return manatees to Florida waters, ensuring that these gentle giants can thrive for generations to come."

The manatee releases come at a critical time for the species, as Florida manatees face ongoing natural and human-caused threats and highlight the importance of partnership efforts that extend beyond Florida.

"What's special about the MRP is the way it brings organizations together through a coordinated network of partners, extending the reach of manatee conservation far beyond Florida. Caring for manatees here in Ohio also provides us with the opportunity to connect millions of guests with their story, helping people understand why manatees matter and what it takes from all of us to protect them. It's incredibly rewarding to know our role helps support their journey back home and that their story can inspire action everywhere," said Becky Ellsworth, curator of the Columbus Zoo's Shores and Aquarium region.

**Manatees that were transferred back to Florida waters**

<b>Manatee</b>	<b>Rescue location &amp; weight</b>	<b>Rehabilitated at</b>	<b>Release Site</b>
Clawford (female)	Matanzas River, St. Augustine 8/2/23 59 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo	Blue Spring State Park
Mandalore (female)	Blue Spring State Park 2/3/25 180 lbs	The Bishop Museum of Science and Nature	Blue Spring State Park
Vora (female)	Lake Santa Barbara, Pompano Beach 10/2/23 57 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo, Cincinnati Zoo, Clearwater Marine Aquarium	Blue Spring State Park
Lilypad (female)	Salt Springs, Marion County 12/8/23 97 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo, Cincinnati Zoo	Blue Spring State Park
Carditee (female)	San Sebastian River 9/4/20 146 lbs Re-rescued 12/3/25	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo, Zoo Miami, Welaka National Fish Hatchery	Blue Spring State Park
Cypher (male)	Imperial River, Bonita Springs 4/6/2024 68 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando	Warm Mineral Springs
Mr. Dobak (male)	Coral Creek – Placida 1/30/23 174 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo, Welaka National Fish Hatchery	Warm Mineral Springs
Kyber (female)	Kings Bay, Crystal River 2/3/25 202 lbs	The Bishop Museum of Science	Crystal River
Orchid (female)	Three Sisters Springs, Crystal River 3/13/24 165 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo, Cincinnati Zoo, Clearwater Marine Aquarium	Crystal River
Richey (male)	Pithlachascotee River, New Port Richey 12/13/24 351 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, The Seas with Nemo & Friends at EPCOT	Crystal River

Cobble (male)	Three Sisters Springs, Crystal River 2/15/24 156 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Columbus Zoo, The Seas with Nemo & Friends at EPCOT	Crystal River
Lorenzo (male)	Caloosahatchee River, Fort Myers 11/11/24 139 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Georgia Aquarium	Crystal River
Sleet (male)	Crystal River 1/8/25 295 lbs	Zoo Tampa at Lowry Park, Mote Marine Lab	Crystal River
Puck (male)	Placido Bayou, St. Petersburg 1/25/24 240 lbs	Zoo Tampa at Lowry Park	TECO
Julien (male)	Forked River, Englewood 2/11/25 284 lbs	Zoo Tampa at Lowry Park	TECO
Crane (female)	Cranes Bayou, Longboat Key Sarasota 2/26/25 355 lbs	The Bishop Museum of Science and Nature	TECO
Cabbage (male)	Portosueno Park, Bradenton 2/27/25 355 lbs	The Bishop Museum of Science and Nature, Mote Marine Lab	TECO
Jameson (female)	Indian River/Fort Pierce 2/11/25 331 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando	Riviera Beach
Giovanni (male)	Vaca Key Bight/Marathon 8/27/24 141 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters	Florida Keys
Luca (male)	South Sound Creek - Key Largo 5/5/25 340 lbs	SeaWorld Orlando, Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters	Florida Keys

### **About the Manatee Rescue and Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP)**

The Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP) is a group of non-profit, private, state, and federal entities dedicated to advancing manatee conservation through collaborative partnership. MRP partners participate in the rescue, rehabilitation, release, and post-release monitoring of manatees. This network of institutions includes acute care facilities that provide treatment to orphaned, sick, and injured manatees with the hope of one day returning them to the wild. MRP researchers collect

invaluable data through manatee monitoring efforts to improve the understanding of manatee biology and health. By partnering cooperatively, MRP members work to promote stewardship and financial support of manatee conservation efforts through public education. For more information, visit us at [manateerescue.org](http://manateerescue.org) or on social media: [Facebook](#) [X](#) [Instagram](#).

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