Animal control in Portland is a one-woman show

pressherald.com/2024/06/01/animal-control-in-portland-is-a-one-woman-show

June 1, 2024

Ruthann Weist researches a case at the Portland Police Department on Wednesday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

Ruthann Weist stands inside the Portland Police Department on Middle Street with one hand on her hip and a chunky black flip phone pressed to her ear.

“Been dead at least a week,” she says, then pauses to listen. She nods. “Yup, we should do it at high tide. I have a tarp we could use, or a body bag. That should be large enough to hold a dolphin.”

She’s on the phone with Portland’s harbormaster, planning an elaborate recovery of a dead dolphin that’s been floating off the coast of Little Diamond Island. It’s an unusual problem for Portland, where dolphins rarely make it to Casco Bay’s waters.

Weist has been fielding constant calls about the animal. People are upset that it is beginning to decompose close to shore. It’s gross. It smells bad. It’s upsetting their kids.

She’s been putting together a plan to get rid of the body, and she thinks today is the day.

Weist, who goes by Ruu, is Portland's only animal control officer. The 36-year-old is part of the police department and is charged with handling any "animal issues" that arise within city limits, which includes the Casco Bay islands.

The job is as broad as it sounds. She responds to reports of dogs stuck in hot cars and wild animals getting into houses. She issues tickets for violating leash ordinances, for nuisances and for dangerous dogs. She responds to calls about rabid animals – which, she says, usually are not actually rabid. Occasionally, she has to make the decision to euthanize.

Ruthann Weist picks up a dog from the Homeless Services Center on Friday. Its owner was hospitalized, so Weist was taking the dog to The Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland until the owner can reclaim it. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

In the summer, she is usually swamped with calls, driving and boating and walking all over the city, responding to whatever animal crisis might arise. But things are slower in the winter. Some days, she'll spend hours just patrolling parks for off-leash dogs.

"It's different every day," Weist says.

AN UNDERDOG

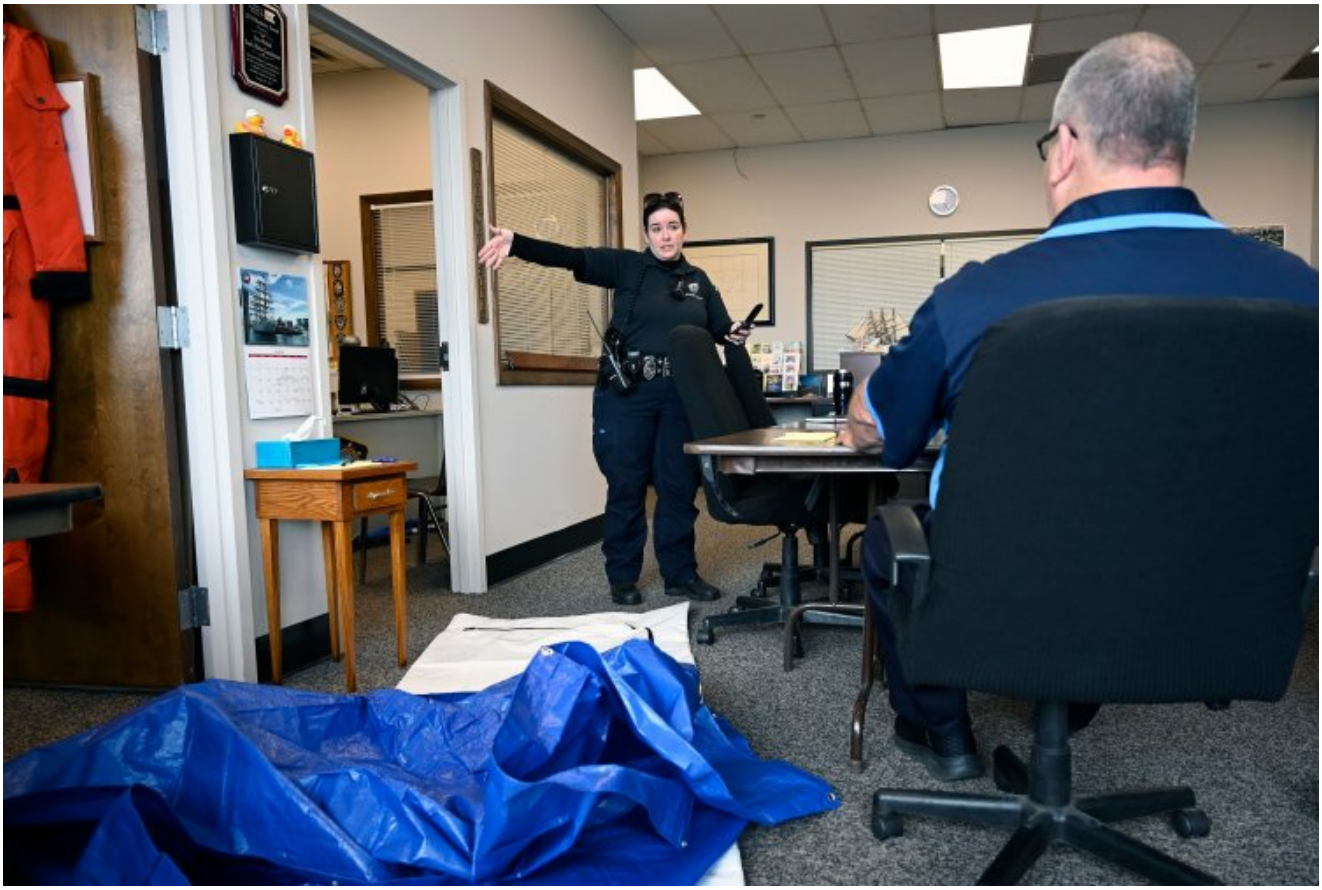
When Weist hangs up with the harbormaster, she walks quickly to her van.

“We want to get this thing done,” she says, pushing through the police station doors out into the sunny day. She pops her sunglasses down over her eyes. Weist is almost never still. As she walks, she takes a call about a squirrel stuck in a chimney. She takes another about a missing cat at the Barron Center.

Her docket for the day keeps growing.

A big dog knocked over an older man on Great Diamond Island, landing him in the hospital. She needs to issue a summons. She has the owner’s photo and name but no idea where she lives. She also has an ongoing animal abuse case where the owner is trying to get the dog back.

Weist has had this job for eight years. At 28 years old, she decided to move from the Midwest for the position because, she says, “I needed a job, and this one was open.”



Ruthann Weist makes plans with Portland Harbormaster Kevin Battle to go gather the remains of a bottlenose dolphin that was found in the harbor. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

“Ruu is an exceptional member of the police department,” Rich Bianculli wrote in an email. He works closely with Weist as the department’s neighborhood prosecutor. “Her primary concern at all times is the safety and welfare of animals and she is willing to go the extra mile.”

Weist has a dry sense of humor, but her love of animals is obvious. Her khaki backpack is covered in patches. One reads: “Dinosaur Eats Man.” She wears a sterling silver wolf ring with glow-in-the-dark eyes.

“To me, it’s a coyote, not a wolf,” she says. She thinks coyotes are misunderstood, and she loves an underdog.

She sometimes gets calls from people concerned that a coyote is following them on a trail, and she’ll walk them through what to do. Usually, Weist says, coyotes follow people in an effort to “escort them” away from their den. They mean no harm, she says, but people get scared.

“People think they kill pets, so they become hated. But that’s not really true. They eat rodents more than anything else,” she says.

Ruthann Weist picks up a dog from the Homeless Services Center on Friday. Its owner was hospitalized so Weist was taking the dog to The Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland until the owner can reclaim it. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

A DAY IN THE LIFE

About 10:30 a.m., Weist walks to the courthouse to pick up paperwork for the abuse case, which she needs to deliver to the animal shelter in Westbrook. As she thumbs through the paperwork, she talks with Julie Webber, a supervisor in the district attorney's office.

"There should be an animal court," Weist says. "We have family court and stuff.We need one for animals."

"Of all the cases I work, the ones involving animals are the most emotionally charged," Webber says, nodding.

Ruthann Weist ties ropes on a tarp as she heads out to retrieve a bottlenose dolphin on Wednesday.
Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

Weist hands off more serious cases, like animal abuse, to the district attorney to be prosecuted. But things like dangerous dog tickets go to Bianculli, the neighborhood prosecutor, who resolves more minor disputes, usually without criminal charges.

"Addressing quality-of-life issues," is how Bianculli puts it. That includes graffiti, littering, disorderly conduct and most dog violations. He can issue minor fines, and sometimes tickets or even bans on certain dogs in the city.

When Weist leaves the courthouse a few minutes later, she is focused on her biggest project of the day: the dolphin recovery.

She hops into her van – crowded with crates, carriers, animal first aid supplies, a tarp and two body bags – and drives to the harbor.

DOLPHIN RECOVERY

Kevin Battle, Portland's harbormaster, is waiting for her in his office on the Portland Fish Pier. He and Weist sit several seats apart around a table, and Battle grabs a pen and notebook paper.

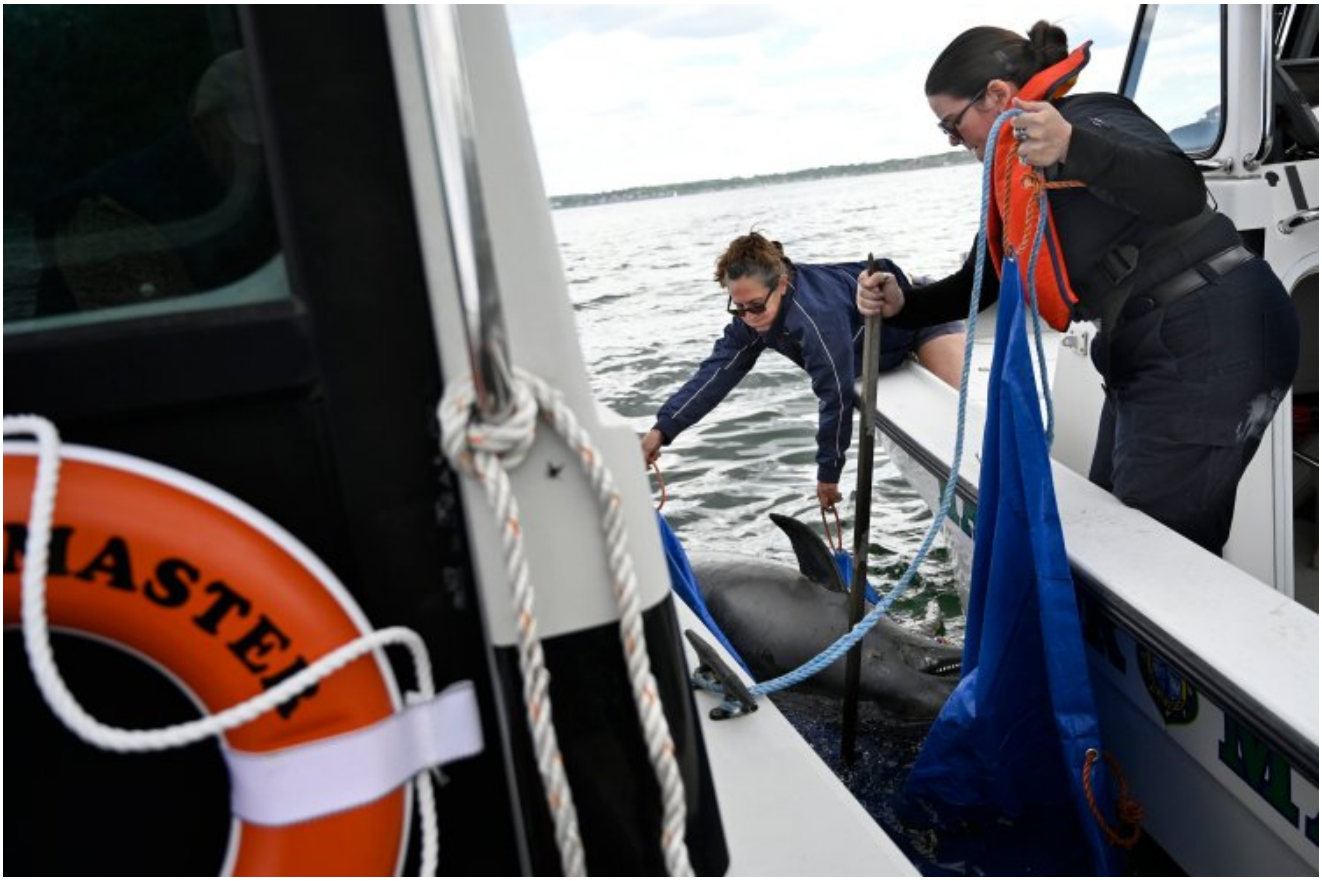
"So, we're gonna go out to the dolphin. One boat will go on one side; the other will go on the other side," says Battle, sketching the two boats alongside the dolphin. "If it looks like the body bag will fit, we'll slip it in there.Otherwise, we'll end up using the tarp and see if we can get it wrapped up, then we tow it in."

Weist nods.

A dead bottlenose dolphin floats in Portland Harbor as a ferry motors nearby on Wednesday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

A little after noon, she and Battle board a Boston whaler with their supplies. Battle drives, and Weist gets to work cutting the rope into 2-foot pieces. She ties makeshift handles through the grommets of the tarp. The dolphin is tied to a mooring just off the shore of Little Diamond Island, about a 20-minute boat ride from the harbor.

"She looks bloated," Weist says as they approach.



Ruthann Weist, Portland's animal control officer, works with Deputy Harbormaster Elizabeth Morrissey to secure a deceased bottlenose dolphin to the side of the boat in Portland Harbor. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

Battle warns everyone it's possible the dolphin will explode. She's been decomposing for weeks and is likely full of gas. A baby dolphin is still attached to her body. She probably died giving birth, he says.

Deputy harbormaster Elizabeth Morrissey pulls up alongside Weist and Battle in the second boat, and the three get to work wrapping the dolphin in the tarp and tying it to the side of Battle's boat – they had quickly determined the body bag wasn't big enough.

There are a few hiccups.The dolphin's head slips from the tarp once, and her dorsal fin begins to detach. Her body is only loosely held together now after weeks of decomposition, Weist says.

Eventually, the group is able to tie the makeshift sling to the side of the boat to be towed to shore.

"Don't touch your face!" Morrissey calls the crew once the job is done. "Oh, my God, that was gross."

Ruthann Weist, Portland's animal control officer, talks with Deputy Harbor Master Elizabeth Morrissey after they secured a deceased bottlenose dolphin to the side of the harbormaster's boat. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

'YOU DON'T GET TO SEE THAT VERY OFTEN'

Weist has planned to deliver the dolphin to the Spring Point Marina in South Portland, where staff have agreed to use a boat lift to get the 500-pound animal out of the water and into the back of a truck.

She has made arrangements with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to hand the dolphin off to Drew Desjardins, who runs Mr. Drew and His Animals Too, a nonprofit exotic rescue and family natural science museum in Lewiston.

He plans to harvest the animal's skeleton for an exhibit.

"It'll be a great addition," Desjardins says. "We're setting up an aquatics exhibit in the museum, and we really want to expand into that area for marine education, so we'll incorporate the dolphin into that."

Ruthann Weist watches as the deceased bottleneck dolphin is lifted out of the water by a boat lift so it can be loaded into a pickup truck and delivered to a nonprofit museum in Lewiston. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

At the marina, a crowd gathers. The crew tries to work the dolphin into the loops of the boat lift. People snap photos. A group of teenage girls in neon T-shirts stands on a dock overlooking the marina. One covers her mouth. Another scoots closer.

“Is that a dolphin?” someone yells from their boat.

“Yup,” Weist says, hands on her hips.

She finds Jen Marchigiani, who is picking up the dolphin for Desjardins and helps her back her truck up closer to the boat lift. A few people gasp as the dolphin is raised into the air, its pock-marked, rotting belly illuminated in the sun. The smell is terrible. A girl on the dock gags.

It lands in Marchigiani’s truck with a heavy thud. She can’t close the tailgate.

“Just take it real slow,” Weist advises her.

As Marchigiani drives away, the dolphin's head bouncing in the back, Weist is already on the phone with Maine State Police. She tells them not to worry if they get a call about a dolphin going north on Interstate 95.

"It's all above board," she says into the phone.

Ruthann Weist, Portland's animal control officer, talks with Deputy Harbormaster Elizabeth Morrissey after they secured a deceased bottlenose dolphin. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

On the boat ride back to Portland with Battle, Weist is on to the next crisis. She didn't have time earlier to drive out to Westbrook with the paperwork for the animal abuse case, so she'll head straight there from the marina, she says.

As the boat pulls closer to Portland's harbor, Weist notices something in the sky.

"Is that an osprey?" she says, pointing. "It is! Look, it's diving."

The bird swoops down to the sea and then bolts back up again. After a few dives, it comes up with a fish.

"Wow, it got something," Weist says. "You don't get to see that very often."

As Battle docks the boat, her eyes linger on the bird.

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