

Colossal catch a rare find in Gulf Scientists net giant squid, only the second such discovery in area squid: Weighed 103 pounds

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Scientists weren't sure what they would find when plumbing the Gulf of Mexico's depths for the prey of sperm whales, but they got more than they bargained for when they netted a 20-foot giant squid.

"This was beyond everyone's expectations," said Deborah Epperson, a U.S. Minerals Management Service biologist leading the study.

Just once before, in 1954, has a giant squid been found in the Gulf of Mexico. That animal's remains were floating at the surface near the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Scientists know the creatures live in the Gulf because they have found remnants in the stomachs of sperm whales.

The find came on July 30 during one of the first cruises of a two-year, \$550,000 project by Minerals Management Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to characterize the nature and diversity of what sperm whales eat in the Gulf.

The project is part of the government's effort to better understand an endangered sperm whale population living in an area that is highly industrialized with oil and gas exploration and production activities.

Found off Louisiana

Sperm whales are the giant squid's only known predator.

The 103-pound specimen was found after scientists trawled at 1,500 feet and then pulled their net to the surface off Louisiana.

"As the trawl net rose out of the water, I could see that we had something big in there - really big," said Anthony Martinez, a marine mammal scientist for NOAA, according to an agency news release. "We knew there was a remote possibility of encountering a giant squid on this cruise, but it was not something we were realistically expecting."

The squid, like other deep water catches, was dead when brought to the surface because the animals can't survive the rapid changes in water depth as they are hauled in. Scientists at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History are studying the specimen further to determine its exact species.



Giant squid can grow up to 40 feet in length, and because scientists know so little about them, they're not sure if the Gulf specimen is a full-grown adult, Epperson said.

The large, rarely seen animals live around the globe, found typically near continental slopes where the continental shelf meets deep water. Scientists believe they live there because canyons cut into the slope offer easy access to fish and smaller squid.

The recent find has heightened expectations for the second, more thorough phase of the two-year cruising program that begins in January and will run through March, Epperson said

"This really heightens the fact of how little we know about what's in the Gulf of Mexico, and the diversity in the deep water," she said. "We just can't be sure of what we will find."

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