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Stranding Records of Rorquals (Cetacea: Balaenopteridae) along the East Coast of South Sumatran Waters, Indonesia

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Abstract
This paper documents two rorqual whale stranding events along the eastern coast of South Sumatra, Indonesia, a region where marine mammal records remain scarce. The first event, recorded on 15 January 2021 in Sungai Kong, was identified as a Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus* based on morphological characteristics such as body size and asymmetrical jaw coloration. The individual was successfully refloated and returned to deeper waters. The second event, on 26 February 2026 in Sungai Somor, involved a Bryde's whale *Balaenoptera edeni*, identified by the presence of three rostral ridges and characteristic body morphology; despite rescue efforts, the individual later died. Both strandings occurred in shallow, estuarine environments characterized by muddy substrates, mangroves, and strong tidal influences, conditions that may increase stranding risk for large whales. These records provide important baseline data on the occurrence of rorquals in South Sumatran waters and highlight the ecological significance of the region.

Keywords: *Balaenoptera edeni, Balaenoptera physalus,* Baleen Whale, Bangka Strait, Indonesia.

Introduction

Whales of the family Balaenopteridae (rorquals) represent some of the largest and most widely distributed marine mammals in the world, inhabiting both oceanic and coastal waters (Thomas *et al.* 2016; Blázquez *et al.* 2024). Several rorqual species, including blue whales, fin whales, Bryde's whales, and minke whales, are known to occur in tropical and subtropical regions of the Indo-Pacific (Rudolph *et al.* 1997; Miller 2007). Despite their broad distribution, information on the occurrence, ecology and mortality of large whales in Indonesian waters remains limited (Mustika *et al.* 2009; Dharmadi & Wiadnyana 2011). In particular, strandings provide valuable opportunities to document species presence, distribution patterns and potential threats affecting marine mammals in poorly studied regions (Ottewell *et al.* 2016; Sahri *et al.* 2024; Sudikan *et al.* 2024).

Whale strandings are natural or anthropogenic events in which individuals become stranded along coastlines, either alive or dead (Thorne & Wiley 2024; Kumar *et al.* 2025). Such events can be influenced by multiple factors, including illness, navigational errors, prey distribution, harmful algal blooms, underwater noise, entanglement in fishing gear, or ship strikes (Clark *et al.* 2021; Arias *et al.* 2026). Across numerous regions, the consistent documentation of stranding events has become integral to marine mammal conservation, providing key insights into population dynamics and potential threats

(Chan *et al.* 2017).

The eastern coast of South Sumatra, bordering the eastern Indian Ocean and the Bangka Strait, is characterized by extensive estuarine systems, mangrove ecosystems, and shallow coastal waters (Iqbal *et al.* 2021, 2022). Despite its high biological productivity and support for diverse marine fauna, records of large whale occurrences in this region remain scarce and inadequately documented in the scientific literature (Danielsen & Verheugt 1990; Mustika *et al.* 2009). Although marine mammal records from South Sumatra remain limited, previous studies have documented the occurrence of cetaceans in the region, including the Irrawaddy Dolphin *Orcaella brevirostris* in the estuarine and coastal waters of the Banyuasin–Sembilang region (Iqbal 2003; Fauziyah *et al.* 2022). In addition, cetacean strandings have been reported from Indonesian waters more broadly (Mustika *et al.* 2009), and occasional observations of large whales by local communities suggest that rorquals may occur along the eastern coast of Sumatra; however, detailed documentation, confirmed species identification, and analyses of stranding causes have been lacking. Here, we report two rorqual whale records from the eastern coastal waters of South Sumatra, providing the first detailed documentation of their occurrence in the region.

Methods

This study documents and analyzes two incidental rorqual whale stranding events recorded along the eastern coast of South Sumatra Province, with the aim of identifying the species involved and describing the environmental characteristics associated with each event. Data were compiled from local community reports and published media sources. In accordance with the approaches of Iqbal (2003) and Fauziyah *et al.* (2022), essential data for each case were documented, including the date, location, habitat characteristics, and overall condition of the stranded animal.

The study area encompasses the eastern coastline of South Sumatra Province, Indonesia, a region defined by extensive estuaries, mangrove ecosystems, and shallow marine environments (Setiawan *et al.* 2019, 2020). Two rorqual strandings were recorded (Fig. 1): one on 15 January 2021 in Sungai Kong, Pedade Village, Tulung Selapan Subdistrict, and another on 26 February 2026 in Somor Village, Cengal Subdistrict, both within Ogan Komering Ilir District (Warta 2021; Adeva 2026; Id 2026). The presence of multiple river mouths, shallow coastal waters, and extensive muddy intertidal zones may increase the likelihood of stranding events by creating complex navigation conditions for large marine vertebrates, particularly during tidal fluctuations (Kanji *et al.* 2019; Thorne & Wiley 2024).

Because the stranded whales were not examined directly by the authors, species identification relied on photographs, videos, and accompanying descriptions obtained from local community reports and published media sources. Visible morphological characteristics, including body size, coloration patterns, dorsal fin shape, rostral structure, and baleen characteristics (when visible), were assessed and compared with published identification guides to determine species identity. Body length was approximated through visual scaling against adjacent objects or human figures.

Species identification was conducted based on external morphological features visible in photographs and videos. Identification followed standard marine mammal identification guides for baleen whales in the Indo-Pacific region (Jefferson *et al.* 1993, Kinze 2001, Demere 2014). Diagnostic characters such as body proportions, dorsal fin morphology, and coloration patterns were compared with descriptions available in the scientific literature.

Results and Discussion

Stranding Record on 15 January 2021

On 15 January 2021, a whale was reported stranded in Sungai Kong, Pedade Village, Tulung Selapan Subdistrict, Ogan Komering Ilir District, South Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The individual was found stranded on a muddy intertidal flat adjacent to an estuarine coastline characterized by extensive mangrove forests and shallow coastal waters (Warta 2021). Based on visual scaling against nearby observers and other reference objects visible in photographs, its total length was estimated at approximately 7 m.

Although the available photographs and videos did not clearly show all diagnostic features, several external characteristics could still be observed. The body was elongated and streamlined, consistent with the morphology of baleen whales belonging to the family Balaenopteridae (rorquals). The dorsal fin appeared relatively small, falcate, and positioned posteriorly on the body, a typical characteristic of rorquals. The species was identified as the Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus* based on

body size, proportional comparison with nearby observers, and its distinctive coloration. The body is black to dark brownish-grey on the dorsal and lateral surfaces, and white ventrally, although the ventral coloration was not clearly visible. Notably, the head displays asymmetrical coloration, with the left lower jaw predominantly dark and the right lower jaw largely white (Fig. 2). These features agree well with published descriptions of *B. physalus* in field identification guides (Jefferson *et al.* 1993; Kinze 2001; Deméré 2014).

After being assisted and guided back into deeper waters by local residents, the whale was able to recover sufficiently to swim away. No subsequent sightings were reported, indicating that the intervention was likely successful (Inge 2021; Siregar 2021).

Information on the occurrence of baleen whales in this region remains scarce, largely because systematic marine mammal surveys have rarely been conducted in the eastern coastal waters of Sumatra (Rudolph *et al.* 1997; Mustika *et al.* 2009; Dharmadi & Wiadnyana 2011). To the best of our knowledge, and based on a review of available scientific publications and accessible records, this represents the first published record of *B. physalus* from South Sumatran waters.

Stranding Record on 26 February 2026

A second stranding event occurred on 26 February 2026 along the east coast of South Sumatra. Similar to the previous event, the body was found on a muddy coastal area near a river mouth. The environmental setting was characterized by shallow waters, estuarine influence, and extensive mudflats exposed during low tide (Adeva 2026; Id 2026). The individual was estimated to be approximately 10 m in total length based on visual scaling against nearby observers and other reference objects visible in photographs and videos.

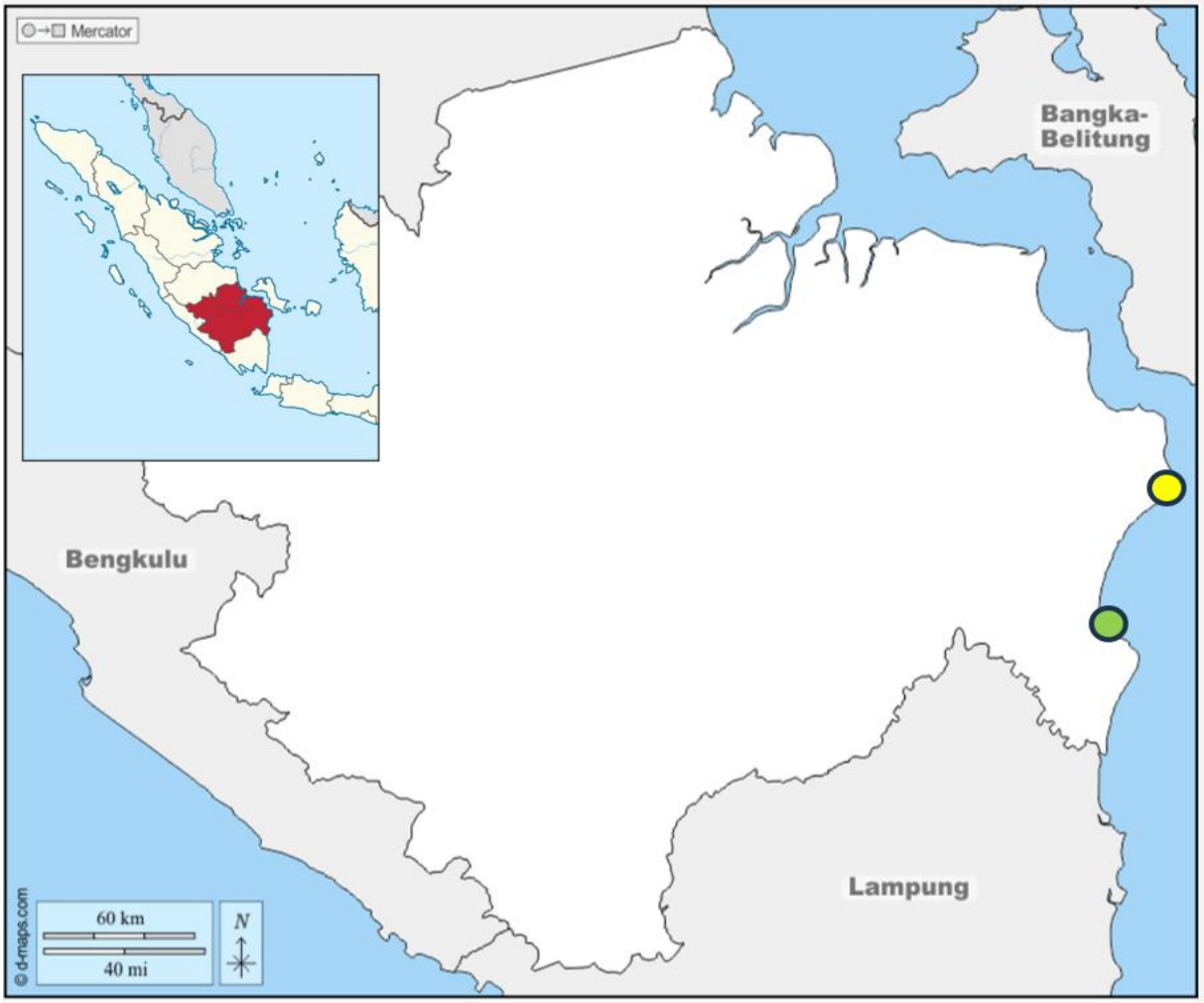


Figure 1. Map of South Sumatra Province showing the locations of two stranded rorquals recorded in 2021 and 2026 in Ogan Komering Ilir District, Sumatra, Indonesia. The yellow circle indicates the 2021 record (Fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus*), while the green circle marks the 2026 record (Bryde's Whale *Balaenoptera edeni*).

Compared to the 2021 record, the condition of the whale allowed clearer observation of external morphological features. The body showed the elongated and streamlined form typical of balaenopterid whales. The rostrum appeared relatively pointed, and the dorsal fin was moderately curved and positioned in the posterior third of the body. The dorsal coloration was dark gray, while the ventral region appeared lighter. Based on these morphological traits, the whale was identified as Bryde's whale *Balaenoptera edeni*. A distinguishing feature of *B. edeni* is the presence of three prominent ridges on the rostrum (Fig. 3), whereas most other rorquals have only a single ridge. While this is a helpful identification trait, it is best considered alongside other morphological features. These features are consistent with published descriptions of *B. edeni* in field identification references (Jefferson *et al.* 1993; Kinze 2001; Deméré 2014).

Local residents attempted to refloat and direct the stranded whale toward deeper waters in an effort to facilitate its survival. However, despite these rescue efforts, the individual was subsequently found dead in the surrounding area several days later (Nursatria & Jaya 2026; Tanjung 2026). No necropsy or detailed post-mortem examination was conducted, preventing determination of the proximate cause of death. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the mortality resulted from pre-existing illness, injury, physiological stress associated with the stranding event, or other natural or anthropogenic factors. The absence of a necropsy represents a missed opportunity to identify potential threats affecting marine mammals in the region, such as disease, trauma, fisheries interactions, vessel strikes, or pollutant exposure. This limitation highlights the need for a coordinated marine mammal stranding response network in South Sumatra, supported by trained personnel, standardized documentation procedures, and necropsy protocols, to improve understanding of mortality drivers and strengthen cetacean conservation and management in Indonesian waters.



Figure 2. A Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus* was recorded stranded on 24 January 2021 in Sungai Kong, Tulung Selapan Subdistrict, Ogan Komering Ilir District, South Sumatra Province. The head is asymmetrically colored, with the left lower jaw predominantly dark and the right lower jaw largely white (Photograph: Adi Warta).



Figure 3. A Bryde's Whale *Balaenoptera edeni* was documented on 15 February 2026 in Sungai Somor, Cengal Subdistrict, Ogan Komering Ilir District, South Sumatra Province. Key diagnostic features include: 3a) three distinct longitudinal ridges on the head, and (3b) a whitish lateral body pattern on the ventral side, both consistent with the illustration provided by Kinze (2021) and Jefferson *et al.* (1993) (Photograph: Riski Adeva and Republix Id).

Environmental Context of Strandings.

The coastline of eastern South Sumatra forms part of a complex coastal system influenced by several large river mouths and estuarine environments (Danielsen & Verheught 1990; Iqbal *et al.* 2025). These coastal habitats are characterized by shallow bathymetry, high sediment loads, and extensive intertidal mudflats (Jim & Sumardja 1998; Helfa 2014). Shallow coastal topography has frequently been associated with whale stranding events worldwide (Thorne & Wiley 2024). In such environments, whales may become trapped during tidal fluctuations or experience difficulties navigating through narrow or shallow channels. The presence of strong tidal currents and turbid waters may further complicate navigation for large marine mammals (Kanji *et al.* 2019).

Implications for Marine Mammal Knowledge in South Sumatra

The two stranding records reported here provide important additions to the marine mammal biodiversity records of South Sumatra. Although cetaceans such as *O. brevirostris* have previously been documented from the Banyuasin–Sembilang region (Iqbal 2003; Fauziyah *et al.* 2022), confirmed records of large whales from the eastern coast of South Sumatra remain scarce. The documentation of *B. physalus* and *B. edeni* therefore expands the list of cetacean species known from the region and contributes new information on the occurrence of rorqual whales in western Indonesian waters. Although strandings do not necessarily reflect normal distribution patterns, they provide valuable evidence of species presence and contribute to regional biodiversity inventories. Continued documentation of such events, combined with improved reporting and verification, will help refine knowledge of marine mammal diversity and conservation status in South Sumatra.

Future efforts should prioritize the establishment of a regional marine mammal stranding response network, accompanied by standardized and systematic documentation of stranding events, as well as the implementation of necropsy procedures whenever feasible. Such measures are essential to improve data quality and enhance understanding of stranding causes and population status. According to Cooke (2018) and Cooke & Brownell (2018), the global conservation status of *B. physalus* is classified as Vulnerable, whereas *B. edeni* is categorized as Least Concern. Despite these assessments, both species remain poorly documented along the eastern coastal waters of Sumatra (Rudolph *et al.* 1997; Mustika *et al.* 2009), highlighting the need for region-specific research and monitoring. These measures would greatly improve the ability to determine mortality causes and reinforce marine mammal conservation initiatives in the region.

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