COMMON DOLPHIN

Delphinus delphis (Linnaeus, 1758)

Other Common Names

White-bellied porpoise, saddleback dolphin, crisscross dolphin, hourglass dolphin; delfin comun (Latin America); tobi iruka (adults), ma iruka (juveniles) (Japanese); obyknovennyy or del'fin belobochka (Russian).

Description

Maximum body length is about 2.5 m, though most individuals are less than 2.3 m long. Males are slightly larger than females of the same age. Length at birth is about 80 cm.

The beak of this dolphin is well defined, and it is often black with a white tip. The dark eyepatch is confluent with a dark stripe (or pair of stripes) running to the corner of the mouth.

In body shape the common dolphin closely resembles the striped dolphin. The tall dorsal fin situated near the middle of the back varies from nearly triangular to distinctly falcate, and it is pointed. It ranges from all black to light gray with a black border. A black stripe that attenuates anteriorly connects each flipper with the lower jaw.

The most distinctive external feature is the color pattern on the sides. The light ventral field extends up into the cape, yielding a four-part pattern defined by a crisscross. The back is black, the belly white, the overlap of cape by ventral field tan or yellowish tan, and the area behind the cape gray. These dolphins can be positively identified even at a considerable distance from this unique pigmentation pattern. In southern California, at least, the color of the posterior flank blaze is often subdued, disrupting the crisscross effect.

Natural History Notes

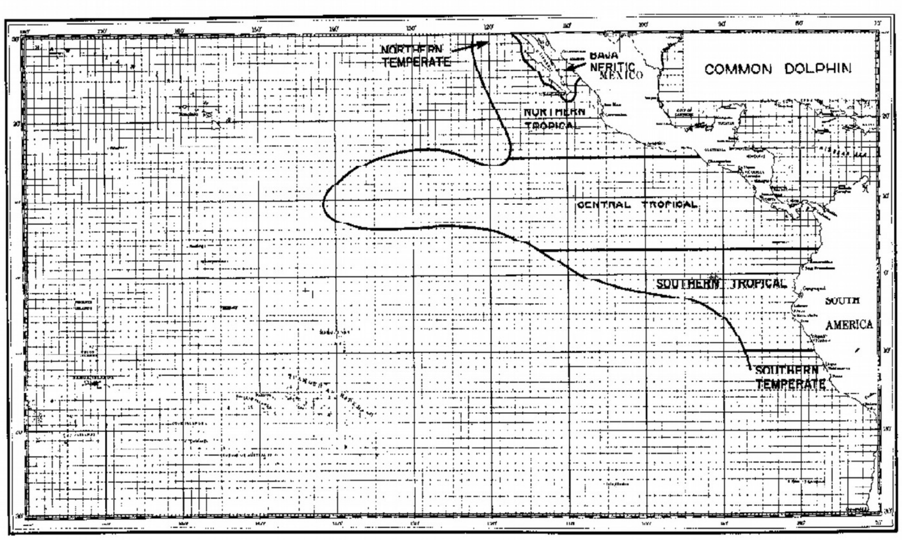
Common dolphins are frequently encountered in herds of a thousand or more, and they are often very active, with many leaping clear of the water at a given time. Like Pacific whitesided dolphins, they are active and willing bow riders and may approach a vessel from a considerable distance. Once on the bow, they may ride for long periods.

The peak seasons for calving in the eastern North Pacific are spring and fall, after a gestation period of 10-11 months. Lactating and near-term pregnant females may segregate themselves from the rest of the population. Gestation and lactation have been tentatively reported as 10-11 months and 5-6 months. Females are capable of bearing calves in successive years, but usually give birth at intervals greater than a year.

Clear seasonal shifts in distribution are observed off southern California, where some common dolphins are present year-round with peaks of abundance in June, September-October, and January. The species appears to prefer water temperatures ranging from 10° to 28°C.

In southern California waters, common dolphins move along major features of bottom relief, such as seamounts and escarpments, remaining generally outside the 183 m (1OO-fathom) curve. After sunset they dive through the vertically migrating deep scattering layer to prey on lanternfishes and squids. They are known to dive to depths of at least 280 m and to remain submerged for as long as 8 minutes. Their fall and winter staples off southern California are anchovies and squid; in spring and summer they consume more deep-sea smelt and lanternfishes. Hake are also eaten.

Distribution



The northernmost stranding record in the eastern North Pacific is from Victoria, British Columbia, but the common dolphin's occurrence that far north must be regarded as exceptional. The few sightings north of Point Conception have generally occurred in spring and summer when fingers of warm water extend northward.

The known range of the species is from lat. 36°N to well south of the equator and offshore to long. 132°W. There are known gaps between lat. 13 °N and 20 °N, and between lat. 27 °N and 32°N, where common dolphins are absent or rare.

At least two forms inhabit eastern North Pacific waters. The smaller, short-beaked form occurs in three apparently separate populations—one north of lat. 32°N off southern California, one between lat. 28°N and 30°N off Baja California, and one south of lat. 15°N. A long-beaked form inhabits only waters inside the 1OO-fathom curve north of lat. 20°N, including the Gulf of California. Where both forms are found in the same geographic range, they apparently do not mix.

The total number of common dolphins living off central and southern California and Baja California has been estimated conservatively to be about 10,000-15,000. Since the common dolphin is found in association with schools of tuna in the eastern tropical Pacific, it has experienced a significant annual mortality as a result of purse seining operations there.

A group of common dolphins awaiting release from a tuna purse seine off Costa Rica in the eastern tropical Pacific. Most of the dolphin's distinctive features are apparent in one or more members of the group. (Photo by W. High, courtesy of NMFS)

Can Be Confused With

Common dolphins can easily be confused with striped dolphins because of their similarity in build and behavior. The larger striped dolphin has two distinctive black stripes on each side, both of which originate near the eye. One ends in the anal region, the other at the forward insertion of the flipper. There is a striking light shoulder blaze. The common dolphin also has two black stripes on each side, but one extends from the eye to the forehead crease and the other from the insertion of the flipper to the lower jaw. The crisscross flank pattern or the V-shaped saddle of the common dolphin is a reliable way lo distinguish it from the striped dolphin.

From a distance, common dolphins may also be confused with spinner dolphins and Pacific white-sided dolphins, both of which form large, frolicsome herds and ride bow waves. However, spinners in the Pacific usually have a tall erect triangular dorsal fin, a long narrow beak, and no striking coloration pattern on the sides. Pacific white-sided dolphins have a taller, more falcate dorsal fin and a much shorter beak than common dolphins. Also, they lack the crisscross pattern or saddle on the sides that is characteristic of common dolphins.

Identification of Dead Specimens

Common dolphins have 40-50 small, sharply pointed teeth in each side of the upper and lower jaws. This tooth count overlaps those of striped dolphins (43-50) and spinner dolphins (46-65).

Excerpted from:
NOAA Technical Report NMFS Circular 444
"Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises of the Eastern North Pacific and Adjacent Arctic Waters - A Guide to Their Identification" by Stephen Leatherwood, Randall R. Reeves, William F. Perrin, and William E. Evans with Appendix A on Tagging by Larry Hobbs. July 1982. U.S. Department of Commerce