

## THE GREAT OUTDOORS



*Bottlenose dolphins are regularly observed hunting and seemingly frolicking off Cape May Point throughout the summer. Photo: Dolphin and Sealife Adventures*

### **Dolphin Upriver**

*Dolphin in the freshwater tidal river of the Maurice are very rare*

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Maybe this is the year of unusual sightings on the Maurice River.

Just a few weeks ago I reported on a harbor seal that was likely in the Maurice to take advantage of our local catfish. Then on May 18<sup>th</sup> people were talking about a common

bottlenose dolphin hanging out near Burcham's Point in Millville.

At first I thought my friends were having a bit of fun at my expense, after the seal encounters. But they earnestly assured me that they were not in cahoots; in fact, a number of other river residents had witnessed the dolphin too.

If seeing is believing, I got my proof five days later. While my husband and I were making routine osprey nesting platform checks, the dolphin gave us a few quick flashes of its fin. I managed to snap a far-off photo.



*This dolphin was spotted in the Maurice River by a number*

*of river residents between May 18-26, 2026. Photo: J. Morton Galetto*

Both of these incidents are likely not indicative of any newly established behaviors, since marine mammals are known for wandering off the beaten path. However, while harbor seals are often solitary, dolphins generally hang out in pods. So seeing a lone dolphin this far upriver was a bit more concerning.

According to the Group for Research and Education (GREMM) on Marine Mammals there are several reasons why an individual might become isolated from its pod.

- **Personality:** Some individuals are simply more independent.
- **Health & Loss:** Researchers suggest that poor health or the death of a companion can drive this behavior.
- **Orphaned Juveniles:** If a juvenile dolphin loses its mother before learning proper social dynamics, it may seek out contact with humans as a substitute.

Dolphins that become “solitary-sociable” as a replacement for their pod may make out well initially, but in the end it is not a healthy situation. In the final stages of these human/dolphin relationships they no longer

return to life with their own species. They don't maintain safe distances from boats, their diving behavior is disrupted, they become ill from human-provided fish, and they hang out in shallower waters that increase the risk of strandings.

This behavior is inherently dangerous because of boat collisions, and in addition reliance on humans for food is a risky practice for both people and dolphins. Fraternization can also lead to entanglements in recreational or commercial fishing gear.

A general rule of thumb is that the feeding of wildlife is a bad idea, and in the case of marine mammals it is illegal (Marine Mammal Protection Act). When viewing dolphins, onlookers are asked to maintain a distance of 50 yards and to limit observations to 30 minutes. Human intentions may be good but in the end the outcomes are generally negative. Habituation can even lead to aggressive behavior.

I deliberately tend to report on unusual animal sightings well after the fact to avoid encouraging onlookers who, in abundance, may cause significant disturbance to the wayward creature. The fact that the

newspaper prints my reports a week later tends to make the temptation to share with our readers less problematic.

The last report that I received was on May 26<sup>th</sup>. Hopefully by now the dolphin has returned to saltier environs like those found in the Delaware Bay, about eight air miles south. While people do see dolphin on the Maurice River, they are much more likely from Dorchester southward.

Lingering in fresher waters, like those found as high upriver as Millville, can be dangerous for dolphins. One saving grace for our recent visitor is that we have been experiencing drought conditions, keeping salinity levels slightly higher. When dolphins are exposed to prolonged low-salinity conditions—such as during the 2019 heavy rain events that triggered Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) in the northern Gulf of Mexico—they can suffer significantly.

In low-salinity conditions dolphins are likely to develop skin lesions and electrolyte abnormalities such as hyponatremia, hypochloremia, and low calculated osmolality, and if acute enough this situation can lead to fatalities. In the UME of 2019, 337 dolphins died (NOAA fisheries).

Why might a dolphin venture so far upstream in the Maurice River? Dolphins have been known to hunt in groups in freshwater estuaries when fish runs are happening. Because the Maurice River has an abundance of catfish, I couldn't help but wonder if both the dolphin and the seal might be seeking out a plentiful food source free of the competition found in the Delaware Bay. While my theory has no scientific proof, it raises a number of fascinating questions.

For instance, catfish have sharp, rigid barbs and dolphins swallow their prey whole. How do they handle the spikes? Research shows that dolphins typically swallow fish head-first so the fins collapse backward, preventing the barbs from piercing their throats. It is fascinating that in regions where catfish carry venomous barbs, some dolphin pods have actually adapted by biting off just the tails, leaving the dangerous heads behind!

You never know what you will encounter in our local rivers and estuaries, but you are guaranteed to see something interesting if you simply take the time to look. ■

(see dolphin facts below)



*Dolphins by Cape May Lighthouse. Photo by: dolphin and Sealife Adventures.*

### **Bottlenose Dolphins Facts**

There are four species of dolphin that frequent New Jersey's coastal waters: the short-beaked common dolphin, the striped dolphin, Atlantic white-sided dolphin, and the common bottlenose dolphin.

The bottlenose dolphin is the most common of the species regularly observed (our facts will refer to this species). They come to warmer waters especially near Cape May in the summer, to feed, mate, and give birth to their calves.

Their dives are generally three to four minutes in duration, although they can stay submerged up to 15 minutes.

Females mature at five to 10 years of age and males at eight to 12 years old. Females give birth every three to six years. Their lifespan is 40-60 years of age.

A major threat to dolphins is accidental capture or entanglement in both commercial fishing gear (like nets and longlines) and recreational rod-and-reel gear.

Recreational interactions often occur because dolphins learn to associate humans with food—usually from being illegally fed, through stealing bait, or by eating discarded fish. This can lead to severe injuries or death from swallowing or becoming tangled in gear. Additionally, frustrated fishermen sometimes violently retaliate against dolphins for stealing their catch.

Habitat destruction in coastal areas and chemical contamination like PCBs degrade their territories. Also, exposure to biotoxins such as algal blooms and red tide cause chronic health issues for these animals.

### **Marine Mammal Stranding Center**



If you see a marine mammal in distress, please report it to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center's 24-hour hotline – 609-266-0538. Since 1978, the MMSC has responded to 6,400 strandings and sees an average of 100-200 animals each year. You can read more about their vital work at [www.mmsc.org](http://www.mmsc.org)