

An Overview of Solitary Dolphins in New Zealand

Solitary Dolphins in New Zealand

Little is known about solo dolphins. There are only 90 or so known cases worldwide, 14 of which are from New Zealand alone.

Male and female solitaries have been recorded in equal numbers and they have been found in almost every corner of the world.

Bottlenose dolphins are the most commonly seen solitary species. Other solitaries include orca, beluga whales, common dolphins, Risso's dolphins, spotted dolphins, dusky dolphins, tucuxi and even narwhal.

Some say that solo dolphins are social outcasts whilst others believe they separate from their pod by choice. Other factors like rough seas or bad weather may force groups apart and individuals may become solitary as a result.

Solo dolphins are a rare phenomenon and give us an incredibly special and unique experience, providing insights that we wouldn't otherwise have.

MOKO

Male Bottlenose Dolphin

Mahia & Whakatane

2007 - Present Day

Moko measures almost 3 metres in length and weighs about 250 kg. Thought to be a 'teenager,' he is still growing. He first appeared in Mahia in March 2007 and was named after the nearby Mokotahi headland. Moko befriended local divers, swimmers and boaties and after thrilling locals for more than 2 years he moved to Gisborne and more recently to Whakatane where he's made himself at home.

Along the way he's made headline news gaining worldwide media attention. In 2008 he came to the rescue of two stranded pygmy sperm whales. Rescuers tried repeatedly to refloat the whales only to see them beach on a large sandbar offshore. Responding to their distress calls, Moko appeared and escorted the mother and calf through a narrow channel and out to sea. As well as saving whales Moko is also known for his playful antics. His favourite games include stealing toys, playing fetch and pushing kayaks through the water with his snout. Sometimes Moko even turns up with presents of fish for his human friends.

SCAR

Male Bottlenose Dolphin

Doubtful Sound

Date unknown

Named after his unmistakable scarring, this solitary dolphin displayed some fascinating behaviours, including carrying a swimmer out to sea over his beak. He was curious around boats, in particular propellers and as an alternative to bow-riding he would place his beak just centimetres from a spinning propeller. Apparently he was fed by fishermen during his stay in the Sound. Sadly these factors probably contributed to Scar's eventual demise. He was euthanized after sustaining severe injuries when he was reversed over by a fishing boat.

PELORUS JACK
Risso's Dolphin
Cook Strait
1888-1912

Pelorus Jack accompanied inter-islander steamers between Wellington and Nelson for 24 years. Jack travelled with each ferry along an 8km stretch of water between Pelorus Sound and French Pass, joining and leaving every ferry at a particular spot. He would bow-ride at speeds of up to 15 knots and was often observed rubbing his body against the ship's hull. His fame spread around the world and thousands of tourists would often make a double crossing on the same ferry just to watch his antics. In 1904 public concern for his safety was so high that the government passed a special law to protect him. Sadly Pelorus Jack was killed by humans in 1912 when he stranded on a beach after a storm.

OPO
Female Bottlenose Dolphin
Opononi, Hokianga Harbour
1955 -1956

Named after the nearby settlement of Opononi this solitary dolphin initially stuck to escorting boats in and out of the Harbour. Gradually she allowed certain people to touch her, later becoming quite discerning, she picked out favourite people that she would interact with. Considered a bit of a show off, Opo would swim with long pieces of kelp in her mouth or with pieces of wood balanced across her beak or dorsal fin. Despite being hit by the propeller of her favourite launch and receiving two large cuts Opo remained friendly and her popularity escalated. Growing attention led to fears for her safety, especially after a rumour that shots had been fired at her because she allegedly interfered with fishing nets in the area. Numerous articles and photos were published in the papers and the National film unit recorded Opo performing a full repertoire of tricks. Concerns for her safety continued when three men reportedly attacked her and tried to drag her up the beach. Special protection was sought for Opo and was planned to come into effect on 8th March 1956. In a sad twist of fate less than 24 hours later, Opo's dead body was found wedged among rocks. Despite speculation the exact cause of her death remains a mystery. Numerous mourners attended her funeral and a statue of Opo was later erected on the Opononi waterfront.

ELSA**Female Common Dolphin****Ngunguru River****December 1978**

Elsa was called to the shore by local children and swimming towards them she grounded herself on the sand. She allowed the children to stroke her for many hours and as the tide receded, concern arose for her safety. Elsa was eased back into deeper water and escorted to the river mouth. It was hoped that she would return to sea but the next day she was found back inside the estuary, stranded amongst sharp rocks. Her cuts were treated and she was placed on a boat, carried out to sea and released in deep water. Elsa swam around the boat a few times before heading off in a northerly direction, she was not sighted again.

HORACE**Male Bottlenose Dolphin****Napier****1978 - 1979**

Horace attracted the attention of locals who began to track and record his movements when he set up residence around a marker buoy. His first swimming companion was a local diver who often played boisterous games with him in the water. Horace became fond of escorting boats in and out of the harbour and was known for altering the rudders on boats to either change their course or immobilize them. Horace gradually allowed some people to touch him and he had a favourite group of people that he would swim with. He also began to mimic the actions of people, pushing centreboards back when they were pushed down and returning splashes with his tail. Some speculate that Horace was killed by an underwater blast whilst others believe that he may have inhaled oil from a diesel spill in the harbour. His actual fate remains unknown.

THE WHITIANGA DOLPHINS: Mother, Calf (Female) & RAMPAL (Male)

Common Dolphin

Whitianga

1981-1989

In 1981 a female common dolphin entered the tidal river at Whitianga and gave birth to a new calf, which was later named Nicky. Over time, four calves were born in the estuary and two survived. Nicky grew to maturity and left the estuary in 1985. The Mother and one calf remained and were joined by another adult dolphin, later named Rampal. The remaining three dolphins seldom interacted with swimmers, but would sometimes accompany boats in and out of the harbour. They would leave the harbour and join up with pods of common dolphins out at sea, but always returned to the estuary. New Zealand dolphin researcher Wade Doak visited the dolphins on three separate occasions, during the visits he concentrated on communicating with the dolphins using different techniques. The responses from the dolphins were amazing, particularly the responses of Rampal who appeared to enter into a 'conversation' using a variety of sounds. Sometimes Rampal would initiate the 'conversation,' with a large burst of bubbles followed by long and increasingly complex sounds. Gradually the dolphins began to spend more time at sea and they were last sighted in the estuary in June 1989.

TAMMY

Male Dusky Dolphin

Tamaki Estuary, Auckland

March-May 1984

Tammy was first sighted swimming amongst rows of moored boats at Tamaki. Initially he ranged along the river but gradually settled around the bow of one particular moored launch. With little interest in interacting with people, he established his territory and tended to move off when approached too closely. People learned to respect his space and to enjoy his amazing aerial displays performed after feeding sessions. It is believed that Tammy eventually left the estuary of his own accord.

AIHE

Female Bottlenose Dolphin

Golden Bay

1987-1993

Aihe ranged several miles along the coast but her favourite resting place was near a ruined jetty in the centre of her range. Sometimes mingling for a few days with pods of bottlenose dolphins that swam through the area, she would later return to her solitary ways. Following her initial human encounter, Aihe became increasingly sociable with boats and swimmers and like many solitary dolphins, she developed a strong relationship with a few favoured friends. One of the greatest dangers to Aihe in Golden Bay was her tendency to strand and she was rescued on seven different occasions. During her 1991 stranding DOC took her measurements and learned she was 2.95 metres long, indicating that she was probably quite young when she first arrived in Golden Bay. Aihe attracted hundreds of visitors and gradually became aloof and avoided contact. She left the area and was later sighted in Nelson and then further east in Cable Bay where she interacted and swam with a few people. After leaving Cable Bay she was last sighted with another Bottlenose dolphin near Pepin Island.

PORT UNDERWOOD JACK

Male Bottlenose Dolphin

Port Underwood

1989-1990

Workers noticed this young dolphin hanging around the floating cages and platforms at a salmon farm. He began interacting with the workers and boats as they moved the cages around and would leap and whistle to attract attention. He increased his interactions with two of the workers who would play games of catch with mussels and gradually he approached their small boat and allowed them to touch him. He only responded to one swimmer, an underwater diver who worked on the cages. Jack would imitate the diver's bubble releases and would follow him around nudging his flippers. Like many solitary dolphins, Jack was interested in propellers. He made himself unpopular by diving down and lifting up the weights that anchored the cages. He learned to entangle the weights in ropes and then would watch as the diver unravelled the mess. Once he became entangled in a mooring chain and had to be saved as he was unable to surface to breathe. Jack's fate is uncertain; however there was a regular pool of leaking diesel oil from the stern of the salmon barge which could have affected him.

SIANY

Bottlenose Dolphin

Bay of Islands

February-June, 1992

Siany was already injured when first sighted in the Waikare River near Paihia. Arriving with five others, this solitary dolphin remained after the others left. Siany had a large white saddle scar on his* back, a damaged dorsal fin and was visibly thin. He also appeared to be having trouble swimming. Siany stayed in the area for five months responding to people, but never developing close friendships. Fresh tooth rakes on his body indicated that the dolphin had contact with other dolphins during his stay. After a final sighting in the river area Siany's minders were delighted to see Siany swimming with two other Bottlenose dolphins in January 1994. It's thought that Siany may have been using the sheltered river area as somewhere to take time out and recover.

*Siany's sex was never confirmed

MAUI

Female Bottlenose Dolphin

Motunau, Kaikoura, Picton, Wellington

1992-1996

Maui first appeared in the small fishing community of Motunau, around 40 km south of Kaikoura. For months she entertained locals and fishermen with her antics and was initially thought to be male, perhaps because of her exuberant behaviour. In Motunau she played continuously with jet powered fishing boats and on one occasion a fisherman found her lying across the top of his cray pot. After a huge easterly storm Maui was sighted near a cray pot buoy close to the Kaikoura seal colony. Staying for almost two years she interacted with a vast number of humans in Kaikoura. Although she had her special friends who regularly swam with her, she seemed to relate to almost anyone who entered the water. Like many of the solitary dolphins who have intense encounters with people, Maui loved being rubbed by seaweed, was fascinated by boats and propellers, was a real show-off and relished playing tricks on her human companions. Maui eventually travelled north to Picton and although she continued to follow boats and interact with people in the water, her encounters became less intense and she spent more and more time roaming around the Marlborough Sounds. When she later returned to Kaikoura her interactions with people were significantly less, instead opting to spend more time with Dusky dolphins that swam through the area. She was often observed swimming belly up with the Dusks – perhaps an invitation for them to mate with her. Maui returned to the Marlborough Sounds in 1995 and the following year was spotted with a calf. Although Maui and her calf continued to hang around boats in the area, she did not engage in any prolonged human encounters. In 1996 Maui disappeared again and was later seen briefly in Wellington, where for a few months she escorted one of the small local ferries. She has not been seen since early 1997.