



# Dolphins in New Zealand waters

## Marine life

Dancers of the ocean, dolphins have delighted us for centuries with their antics, and apparent intelligence. For many people, dolphins represent the quintessential free spirit. Thirteen different species of dolphin are found around the New Zealand coast. The Māori word for dolphins generally is aihe. All marine mammals are fully protected in New Zealand waters under the Marine Mammal Protection Act 1978, which the Department administers.

### Fascinating dolphin facts

- Whales and dolphins are collectively called cetaceans, from the Greek ketos, a whale.
- A mother dolphin is often helped in looking after a young calf by an 'auntie' or 'uncle' dolphin.
- Dolphins are the fastest swimmers at sea, swimming at 20–22 knots for sustained periods.
- Common, bottlenose, dusky and hector's dolphins all like to ride on the bow-waves of ships; they can travel at the same speed as the ship for very little effort!
- Killer whales are actually the largest member of the dolphin family. Their name was originally 'whale killer' – named by sailors who saw them hunt larger whales.

### Dolphins and people

Dolphins have a special place in mythologies from many parts of the world as protectors and friends of humans. Maori have a strong and ancient traditional relationship with marine mammals.

Several individual dolphins have become part of New Zealand's folklore over the past 100 years. From 1888–1912 Pelorus Jack—a Risso's dolphin—guided ships from Wellington to Nelson. He was the first dolphin anywhere in the world to have his own protective legislation, enacted in 1904 when someone from a passing steamer tried to shoot him.

For two summers during 1955 and 1956, a bottlenose dolphin nicknamed Opo (after the Northland settlement of Opononi) played with children, allowing them to touch her and ride on her back. Opo also got her own legislation and a song was written about her.

Common dolphins  
T. Greene



## New Zealand's dolphins

### Hector's and Maui's dolphins

One of the smallest marine dolphins in the world, Hector's dolphins grow no more than 1.5 m in length. Only found in New Zealand's waters, this distinctive grey dolphin with black and white markings and a round dorsal fin is the most easily recognised species of dolphin in NZ. Two sub-species of Hector's dolphins exist: the South Island Hector's dolphin which is found around the South Island of New Zealand, and the Maui's dolphin which is found off the west coast of the North Island. With a population of around 100, Maui's dolphin may be the rarest sub-species of dolphin in the world.

### Common dolphins

Often seen in our coastal waters in schools of several hundred, this streamlined dolphin makes long arcing leaps when moving at speed and often approaches boats to ride the bow wave. Common dolphins frequently leap and do spectacular spins in the air. Easily recognised by its crisscross pattern of colours from purplish-black, dark grey, white and creamy tan, it has a low, smoothly sloping head and sharp beak. Large ones grow to just over 2 m in length.

### The dusky dolphin

An accomplished acrobat, dusky dolphins are a popular tourist attraction around Kaikoura. This species has virtually no beak, as its head slopes evenly down from the blowhole to the tip of the snout, with a bluish-black back, white underbelly and dark bands across its flanks. They grow to about 2 m in length. It has been recorded as far south as Campbell Island, but sightings north of East Cape are rare.

### Bottlenose dolphins

Bottlenose dolphins are among the largest of dolphins, their stout torpedo-shaped body growing up to 3.1 metres long. They are usually dark grey on the back, fading down to white or pink on the belly. They have a distinct short beak, long pointed flippers and a sickle-shaped dorsal fin. Bottlenose dolphins frequently leap out of the water in displays of much spinning and splashing. They will also ride the surf of a ship's bow and slap the water with their fin or head. These actions may be a source of entertainment to the dolphins, but are also likely to serve as practise for more important functions such as communication, food-herding and predator defence.

### Killer whales

An estimated 150 to 200 killer whales inhabit New Zealand waters. They travel long distances between locations, sometimes coming right into harbours. They are sometimes seen doing tail stands, breaching and slapping their flippers on the water. These animals are also commonly known as orca and grow to around 9 m.

### Occasional sightings

Several rare dolphins occasionally seen around New Zealand include Fraser's dolphin, Risso's dolphin, rough-toothed dolphin, striped dolphin, hourglass dolphin, spectacled porpoise and southern right whale dolphin.

## What is being done?

The Department of Conservation administers the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978, which provides for the conservation, protection and management of marine mammals.

The Department administers the Marine Mammals Protection Regulations 1992, developed to manage the rapidly growing whale- and dolphin-watching industry.

DOC is working with local tourism operators to reduce the effects of tourism on dolphins in places like Kaikoura, Bay of Islands and Fiordland.

A marine mammal sanctuary was established in 1988 around Banks Peninsula to protect South Island Hector's dolphin. Set net controls were introduced in Canterbury in 2002 and in the North Island's West Coast in 2003 to protect both South Island Hector's and Maui's dolphins.

Research and scientific studies continue to increase our knowledge about each species ecology, conservation status, life history, and threats.

## How you can help?

- Avoid using set nets, particularly when you cannot remain with your net. If you see dolphins in the area, please remove your nets from the water.
- Please don't swim with the dolphins except with authorised tourist operators. If swimming near dolphins, avoid wearing suntan lotion or insect repellent as chemicals can irritate dolphin's eyes. Do not try to touch dolphins.
- If in a boat use a 'no wake' speed within 300 m of dolphins. Should you need to outdistance them, you may increase your speed gradually to a maximum of 10 knots
- Do not feed dolphins. Human food is harmful.
- Keep their environment clean. Take your rubbish home, and if you find any floating at sea or on the coast, please pick it up.
- Co-operate with others so all may see dolphins without putting them at risk.
- If you find a stranded dolphin, contact your nearest DOC office or police station as soon as possible. DOC has a 24 hour emergency call out number 0800 DOCHOT line, 0800 36 24 68.

If alive;

Keep the animal wet, but don't pour water down its blow hole

Keep the animal upright

Keep the animal shaded from the sun



Bottlenose dolphins S. K. F. Erickson

### For more information

Visit the DOC website at [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)

### Further reading

Baker, Alan. 1990: *Whales and Dolphins of New Zealand and Australia*. Victoria University Press, Wellington.

Michael Donoghue and Annie Wheeler, 1990 *Save the Dolphins*. (David Bateman)