



NOAA FISHERIES Southeast Regional Office

Photo credit: Carol Hough



If you see an albino dolphin,
please contact:
Southeast U.S. Marine Mammal
Stranding Network
Phone: 1-877-433-8299

ALBINO DOLPHINS IN THE SOUTHEAST U.S.

Albinism in Marine Mammals

In 1851, Herman Melville introduced the world to a fictional albino whale named Moby Dick. Since then, some non-fiction cases of albinism in marine mammals have been highly publicized. Overall 21 species of whales, dolphins, and porpoises have been observed with occurrences of anomalously white individuals. The rarity of albinism in marine animals has made these sightings particularly fascinating to the public (Hain and Leatherwood, 1982; Fertl *et al.*, 1999; Fertl *et al.*, 2004, Zimmerman, 2015).

For example, “Carolina Snowball” was a popular albino bottlenose dolphin displayed at the Miami Seaquarium in the early 1960’s. Currently, the Taiji Whale Museum in Japan holds an albino bottlenose dolphin calf that was collected in January 2014 during a drive hunt. An albino humpback whale named “Migaloo” has also been sighted off the coast of Australia since 1991, and a white killer whale name “Iceberg” was first seen off the coast of Russia in 2010.

Very little is known about albino dolphins due to their extreme rarity. While the condition occurs in a very wide variety of species, most of what is known about albinism comes from humans. Scientists estimate that albinism in mammals occurs in about one of every 10,000 births. Albinism is a genetic defect that inhibits the production of melanin or skin pigment. Most forms of albinism are a result of the biological inheritance of genetically recessive genes passed from both parents to an individual, though some rare forms are inherited from only one parent. This genetic trait is characterized by white or light skin and hair, the appearance of pink or red eye coloring and often-impaired vision. Depending on the degree of albinism, an organism may have all or only some of these traits (Hain and Leatherwood, 1982; Fertl *et al.*, 1999; Fertl *et al.*, 2004, Zimmerman, 2015).

Sightings in the Southeast U.S.

Five potentially albino or “white colored” bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus truncatus*) have been sighted in the Southeast U.S.

While there have been many documented sightings of albino, “white” or “pink” bottlenose dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico; it is believed these sightings are of the same three individuals. The first was reported during the summer of 1994 in Little Lake near New Orleans, Louisiana. The all-white dolphin was spotted in a group of 4-5 individuals for 20 to 30 minutes and never seen again. In September 2003, another all white dolphin calf was first observed in a group of more than 40 dolphins south of Galveston, Texas. It was re-sighted several times in the same vicinity through August 2004 (Fertl *et al.*, 1999; Fertl *et al.*, 2004).

An albino dolphin calf was first photographed in June 2007 at Calcasieu Lake, an estuary in southwestern Louisiana, and has been reportedly seen many times since. Photographs and videos of this dolphin have been widely circulated due to the rare occurrence of albino dolphins. Although the dolphin is often referred to as a “pink” dolphin because of its pink coloration, it is considered an albino. The dolphin’s mother is not albino and has the gray coloring typical of coastal bottlenose dolphins. Dolphin calves are typically born dark gray in color. All sightings of this dolphin have been off Louisiana and most of the time it was seen swimming with a group.

Other “white” dolphins have been sighted in the Southeast U.S. between 2012-2014, these include off the coast of South Carolina, NE Florida and Georgia, and in the Indian River Lagoon, Florida.

Guidelines for Viewing Dolphins in the Wild

Dolphins in the wild always generate interest among boaters and the public, particularly if the dolphin is as unusual like an albino. NOAA Fisheries stresses the importance of responsibly viewing wild marine mammals by asking the public to follow these guidelines safe viewing guidelines to prevent harassment and injury to dolphins:

- **Never feed or attempt to feed wild dolphins** – it’s prohibited by Federal law and it kills. For more information, visit: www.dontfeedwilddolphins.org
- **Remain a respectful distance from dolphins. The minimum recommended viewing distance for dolphins is 50 yards** (the length of 1/2 a football field). Binoculars are recommended for best viewing and/or book a tour with a Dolphin SMART business (www.dolphinmart.org).
- **Do not swim with, ride, pet, touch, or attempt to interact with dolphins in the wild.**
- **Limit your viewing time to 30 minutes or less.** Prolonged exposure to one or more vessels increases the likelihood that dolphins will be disturbed.
- **Avoid approaching dolphin(s) when another vessel is near.** When several vessels are in an area, communication between vessels will help to ensure that you do not cause the dolphins to be disturbed by corralling.
- **Never pursue or follow a dolphin.** Any vessel movement should be from the recommended distance and slightly parallel to and from the rear of the dolphin. If you need to move around a dolphin, do so from behind; never approach head-on. Pursuit, torment, or annoyance of marine mammals that has the potential to disturb or disrupt natural behaviors is prohibited by Federal law.
- **If approached by a dolphin, put your vessel’s engine in neutral; allow the dolphin to pass and move away slowly.** Be aware that dolphins may surface in unpredictable locations.
- **Dolphins should not be encircled or trapped between vessels, or vessels and the shore.** Always leave them an “escape route.”
- **Avoid excessive vessel speed or sudden changes in speed or direction, and do not operate or maneuver a vessel in a way that may change the dolphin’s behaviors.** Specifically, do not intentionally direct your vessel or accelerate toward dolphin(s) with the intent of creating a pressure wake allowing them to bow or wake-ride.
- **Avoid excessive noise.** Dolphins have sensitive hearing and communicate by vocalizing underwater. Underwater sound produced by revving a vessel’s engine and banging on a vessel to solicit the animal’s attention has the potential to disturb them.
- **Slowly leave the area if wild dolphin(s) show signs of disturbance.** These include strongly exhaling, tail-slapping, repeated avoidance behavior, erratic changes in speed or direction, increased aerial behaviors, or lengthy periods underwater.
- **Report a dead, injured or entangled dolphin or other marine mammal in the Southeast U.S. to 1-877-WHALE HELP (1-877-942-5343)** or download the Dolphin & Whale 911 smartphone app at the Google Play Store (Android) or Apple Store (iPhone).
- **Report violations** such as feeding, touching, or chasing wild dolphins to the NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement Hotline: **1-800-853-1964**.

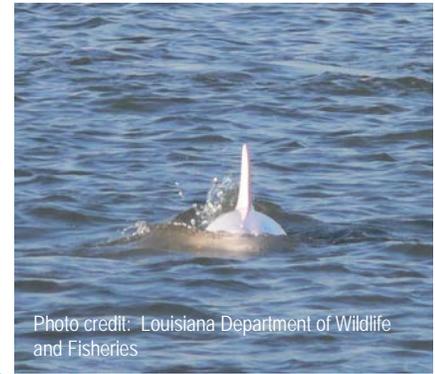


Photo credit: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Sources:

- Fertl, D., Pusser, L.T. and J.J. Long. 1999. First record of an albino bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) in the Gulf of Mexico, with a review of anomalously white cetaceans. *Marine Mammal Science* 15(1): 227-234.
- Fertl, D., Barros, N.B., Rowlett, R.A., Estes, S. and M. Richlen. 2004. An update on anomalously white cetaceans, including the first account for the pantropical spotted dolphin (*Stenella attenuata graffmani*). *Latin American Journal of Aquatic Mammals* 3(2): 163-166.
- Hain, J.H.W. and S. Leatherwood. 1982. Two sightings of white pilot whales, *Globicephala melaena*, and summarized records of anomalously white cetaceans. *Journal of Mammalogy* 63(2): 338-343.
- Zimmermann, T., 2014, "Albino Dolphin," National Geographic, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/01/140128-dolphin-albino-animals-science-japan-hunt-taiji-world/>

For more information about dolphin conservation in the Southeast U.S., visit: <http://dolphins.sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>