



Dolphins, whales put on a show off Central Coast

People have been sighting dolphins from shore along the central coast this month. Dolphins have been spotted just inside the kelp beds and surfing waves less than 100 feet from shore. The visibility of dolphins right now is due to a combination of factors: calm seas, and the occurrence of anchovies and squid in nearshore waters.

If you see dolphins close to shore, most likely they are bottlenose dolphins. Bottlenose dolphins are year-round inhabitants of the Central Coast, spending most of their time within a mile of shore. They range in color from light to dark gray and have a short rostrum, or beak. The bottle-shaped snout is the inspiration for their common name, bottlenose dolphin. They usually occur in small groups of 2-15 animals. They will hunt individually or cooperatively, driving fish into shallow waters for easy feeding. They usually surface to breathe 2-3 times per minute. They can swim very fast underwater, up to 18 miles an hour.

Bottlenose dolphins average about 10 feet in length, with males reaching up to 13 feet and 1,400 pounds. They are a long-lived dolphin species with a lifespan of 40-45 years for males and more than 50 years for females. Biologists estimated that about 3,000 bottlenose dolphins reside off the California coast, with their northernmost point around San Francisco Bay. While bottlenose dolphins occur throughout the world's oceans, their range is limited to a temperate band between latitudes 45 degrees South and 45 degrees North.

Sounds travel through water more efficiently than through air. Dolphins produce clicking sounds in their throats that travel as sound waves through the water. When the sound wave reaches an object (such as a fish), it bounces back to the dolphin's receptors. The dolphin uses this information to determine the location, size and shape of the object. The accuracy of dolphin echolocation has been studied extensively and is extremely accurate.

We are also seeing whales, both gray whales and humpback whales, heading south on their way to wintering grounds in Mexico and South America. They are spending a little extra time here to enjoy the anchovies and squid before they continue southward. San Simeon pier is a great place to see a whale show. With a little luck and patience, they can be observed almost anywhere along our coastline.

Now is a good time to go to a coastal bluff and look for a glimpse of the shiny gray bodies and sharply curved dorsal fins of bottlenose dolphins. Also, look for whale blows, dorsal fins or tail flukes. And don't forget to enjoy the other marine mammals we see frequently (and may take for granted): the spotted harbor seals resting quietly on the rocks along Moonstone Beach Drive, and sea otters, fondly referred to by some as 'teddy bears of the sea.'

As we enter the season of thanks, I express my gratitude for the clean waters of the central coast that provide healthy sanctuary to a diversity and abundance of marine mammals. What's on your gratitude list?

