Dolphins by Ted Avellone

We seem to have a natural liking and even fascination about dolphins. I'm convinced that this is mostly because they happen to have a "resting happy face" by virtue of the upswept curvature of the rear of their mouths which makes them appear to be smiling all the time. So cute! We love dolphins! If they instead happened to have mean-looking or profoundly stupid expressions, maybe we'd be harpooning them left and right, eating and using them for bait, and regarding them as little more than overgrown mullet. But I digress.

What many people may not know is that the dolphins we regularly see around Shell Point are part of what is known as a "discrete stock," which is a loose group of individual dolphins which essentially live in the same general area year-round. Such groups are multi-generational, consisting of several extended families. In other words, most of the dolphin we see can be considered "locals" very familiar with our waters.

It takes a male dolphin about 10 years to reach sexual maturity; females 5-10 years. Pregnancies last 12 months, and the young are born year-round, nursing for 12-18 months. The young stay with their mothers for 3-6 years, during which time they learn the many things they need to know for life in the bay. An adult dolphin weighs an average of about 650 pounds and has a lifespan of about 45 years.

While out on fishing trips out of St. Marks over the years I've often wondered how dolphins seem to know exactly where all of the channels and creek mouths are. It's evidently because mom, dad, and grandpa have all been swimming, playing, hunting, and foraging in these same local waters every day for years. They know their way around, and also remember what fish are usually found where and at what times of year. Because of their ability to use sonar-like echolocation to "see" their surroundings in high detail, even in murky water, and to remember things with their highly developed brains, I'm sure they're as familiar with every hole, rock pile, channel, and creek mouth as we are with our own backyards, garages and kitchens. Marine biologists have documented dolphins' ability to transmit "cultural knowledge," such as particular information learned within a local group, from generation to generation. They communicate with each other through a complex array of various clicks, whistles, and body language.

Dolphin are very social animals and as many of us have seen they will use coordinated hunting techniques wherein several individuals will herd a school of mullet up against a shallow bank and stun them with tail-slaps, gorging on the disoriented hapless stragglers, sometimes nearly beaching themselves in the process before rolling back into the water. Another hunting technique they use is a passive one, where they will quietly cruise and listen with their ultra-sensitive hearing for "soniferous" (noise-making) prey, such as the drums (redfish, black drum, and toadfish), sneaking up and snatching them. In addition to mullet they also consume quantities of pinfish as well as spotted trout, flounder, and sheepshead. They spend about 10-20% of their daytime activity feeding and foraging, and an adult dolphin eats about 20-30 pounds of fish per day. Interestingly, marine biologists have observed that certain groups near our area appear to have learned to decapitate hardhead catfish (Ariopsis felis) before eating them, leaving the front section with its dangerous spined dorsal and pectoral fins behind and eating only the safe rear section.

Another reason we like dolphins is that they definitely seem to have free time and spend time playing and being curious about the world around them. Sometimes they'll ride along the bow-wave of our boats, twisting and looking up at us, and sometimes they'll jump and caper around for no apparent reason other than for the fun of it. Graceful and powerful, whimsical and intelligent, seeing dolphin in our little corner of Apalachee Bay never fails to instill in us a sense of pleasure, wonder and awe.

- Ted Avellone