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Dolphins in NY? Researchers Turn to Boat Tours For Sightings

by Aaron Tremper



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Audio Files · Dolphin Researchers Look to NYC Whale Watching To Understand Rising Numbers

Most of the tourists aboard the American Princess angle to catch a glimpse of humpback whales. The 95-foot ferry takes passengers on whale-watching trips from Brooklyn throughout the summer and fall. Humpbacks are New York's latest ecological success story, returning to the city's cleaner waters each year to bulk up on a small fish called menhaden.

During a mid-July outing, tourists were treated not to humpbacks, but to their smaller cousins, the Atlantic bottlenose dolphins.

The boat exploded in cheers as a pod of over 150 dolphins joined a trio of humpbacks feeding within sight of the New York skyline. Celia Ackerman, the naturalist aboard the boat, estimated the humpbacks were cruising at a leisurely 10 miles an hour in search of menhaden.

The bottlenose dolphins are smaller than their 60-foot cousins. They're faster and their backs are a lighter shade of gray that easily gets lost in the waves. They move like an antelope herd, where each individual melts into the backdrop of the group. When the dolphins surface, it's usually for a second at most.

"People always expect the dolphins to be jumping and playing every time we see them," says Ackerman. "That's not necessarily the case. It depends on what they're doing; we are in an area where they are coming to feed."

Dolphins are hardly a rarity in New York. While dolphin sightings by state and federal wildlife regulators are spotty, studies by local scientists suggest more dolphins are flocking to New York and gathering in groups larger than previously thought. Many are turning to whale-watching ventures to fill in the gaps.

Researchers believe that cleaner waters and [recent fishing regulations for menhaden](#) within the last decade are bringing more whales and dolphins back. The menhaden gather into groups called "bait balls," which attract whales and dolphins from miles away. Ackerman advises whale watchers to look for patches of the ocean that look like it's boiling. You can even hear the water pop when the bunker snap at the surface.

Among whale researchers in New York who often board the American Princess in search of dolphins is Kristi Collum, the lead dolphin researcher for Gotham Whale, a nonprofit that researches whales and dolphins of New York City. She's interested in understanding what bottlenose dolphins are up to in the Big Apple and how often they gather in these large groups.

She says that the historical reports of bottlenose dolphins gathering in small pods of 20 to 40 individuals are outdated. Nearly 9 out of 10 bottlenose dolphin sightings collected by Gotham Whale were groups numbering anywhere from 25 to over 150 animals. [Sighting reports](#) collected this past summer on the American Princess

show pods of over 100 dolphins making regular appearances. At times, guests were treated to over 300 dolphins at one time.

These “superpods” are usually short-lived and happen [when food is abundant or during mating season](#).

“It’s very exciting to be out in the water these times,” says Ackerman.

Collom and Ackerman focus mostly on the New York Bight, a region of ocean spanning from the tip of Montauk, Long Island to Cape May, New Jersey. The Bight is often overlooked by government dolphin researchers. Part of this has to do with bottlenose dolphins being a mainly migratory species in New York, which makes up the northern reach of their summer territory. They usually start showing up as early as April and stay around until late fall. During the winter, New York’s visiting dolphins wait out the cold off of [North Carolina](#).

There are two types of bottlenose populations in New York: offshore dolphins, which prefer living in the open ocean, and the coastal variety, which like to stay closer to the shore. The [latest population estimates](#) of the northern migratory coastal population by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration only go as north as Sandy Hook, New Jersey.

Before 2009, coastal bottlenose dolphins were a rare sight north of New Jersey, says Artie Kopelman of the Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island, who has been studying marine mammals in the region for over 30 years.

That spring, several hundred dolphins were spotted in western Long Island heading east, says Kopelman. Before then, only offshore bottlenose dolphins were spotted around New York. In a couple months, the pod had reached Montauk. Since then, bottlenose dolphins have become a regular sight along Long Island’s south shore, says Kopelman.

Along the Atlantic Coast, the focus has been off the shores of Virginia and North Carolina, where bottlenose dolphins are a year-round presence. Recent work in the Northeast, however, is emerging.

Rob DiGiovanni, founder and chief scientist of the Atlantic Marine Conservation Society, is currently conducting an aerial survey of marine mammals between New York and the Canadian border for NOAA. As more dolphins move into the area, they’ve become an ever increasing sight during his outings.

“Many years ago, we used to go out on a number of surveys before we would see animals,” says DiGiovanni. “Now it’s almost every survey that we’re able to see some species of dolphins.”

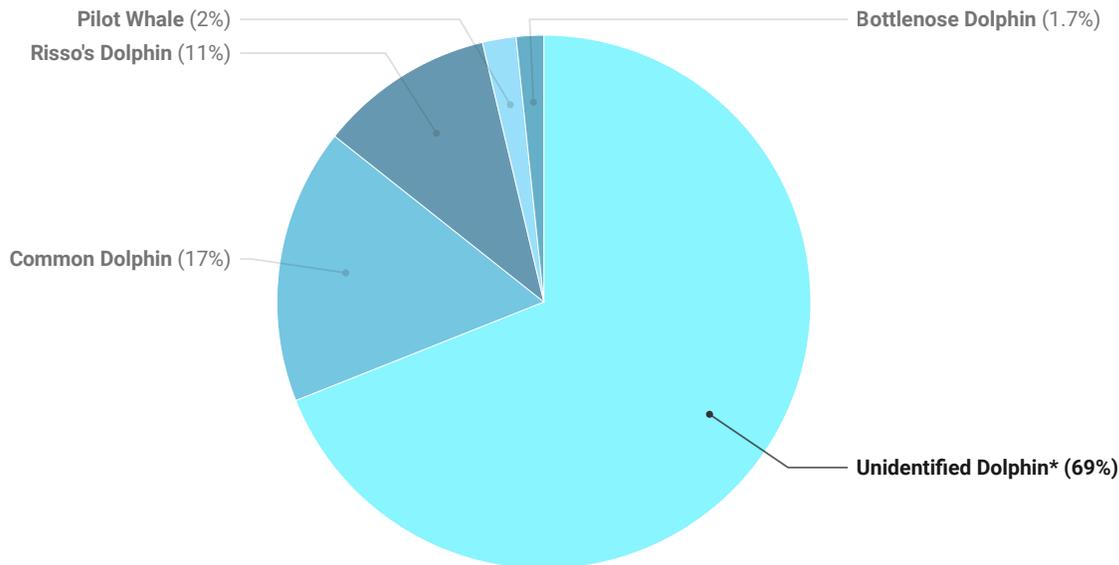
From the boat, you can sometimes see baby dolphins surfacing with their mothers. Ackerman says her team has photographed calves only a few days old. At this age, the calves are streaked with telltale white stripes called “neonatal folds,” which develop as the calf gestates in the womb.

While day-old calves and superpod sightings all point to a rich life for bottlenose dolphins in New York, that knowledge has been mainly gained through local organizations and citizen scientists.

When the New York Department of Environmental Conservation dedicated [three years to conducting aerial surveys](#) on whales off of New York, they recorded thousands of dolphin sightings. The fine print on the DEC report says that the pilots did not repeatedly circle for identification, as they did whales. To confirm whale species, surveyors needed to circle observed whales. Since [pilots didn’t circle dolphin pods](#), the sightings may be an undercount. Focusing on larger whales is understandable; [five of the six large whales](#) identified by state environmental officials are currently recognized as endangered.

Most Dolphins in New York Go Unidentified In Surveys

Between 2017 to 2020, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation conducted aerial surveys of marine mammals as part of its "New York Bight Whale Monitoring" Project. Nearly 7 out of 10 dolphins were not identified in the counts because of survey design. The study's authors say protocols did not include circling to confirm marine mammal species other than large whales.



* "Unidentified Dolphins" include dolphins, cetaceans and individuals with similar morphology that could not be identified down to a specific species.

Chart: Aaron Tremper • Source: [New York Department of Environmental Conservation](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

And with different species come different habits. Take common dolphins. They aren't the stars of Flipper or Sea World like bottlenose dolphins -- they're smaller and more often seen in the open ocean dozens of miles off the New York coast.

But like their better known cousins, the bottlenose dolphins, they love good company. In 1993, the now defunct [Okeanos Ocean Research Foundation](#) reported that gatherings of up to 10,000 dolphins have been seen around underwater trenches dozens of miles off of New York.

This March, [three common dolphins](#) swam up the East River to Greenpoint, Brooklyn. It was an unusual sighting, but one that shows different dolphin species becoming an ever-increasing presence in the East Coast's busiest seaport.

In 2019, researchers from Stony Brook University [recorded bottlenose dolphins foraging around the Atlantic Beach Artificial Reef](#), one of several human-made reefs that New York's Department of Environmental Conservation created decades ago. The goal was to create more habitats for native wildlife while also offering more recreational fishing and diving opportunities to the public.

The study authors found that bottlenose dolphins vocalized constantly around the reefs. The only significant decrease in calls happened on the weekend when boat traffic was at its highest, suggesting that bottlenose dolphin behavior is being affected by vessel traffic, and could possibly face increased encounters with recreational divers and anglers. Researchers say that while dolphins are small and agile enough to avoid the boat collisions [that threaten larger whales](#), they continue to face fishing gear entanglements, eating debris, and human harassment.

The reefs attract more fish, which means more dolphins. But approaching dolphins can have legal consequences. NOAA recommends staying 150 feet away from dolphins. Those failing to do so risk being fined or facing potential prison time.

When Ackerman isn't reciting dolphin facts to camera-toting tourists, she can be found on the upper deck snapping photos of dolphins. Collom uses these photos and Ackerman's field notes as part of her research -- and says people on the ground like Ackerman are an invaluable part of dolphin research.

"Now they are here, and it's such a treat to be able to enjoy them," says Ackerman. "We need to make sure that they're protected here—and the way to do that is to accurately document their occurrence here."