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NAUTICAL NEWS

Uncommon dolphins sighted in local waters

BY PAT REYNOLDS

Some rarely seen northern right whale dolphins and Dall's porpoises were recently sighted in local waters by the Ocean Conservation Society, which is based out of Marina del Rey.

The northern right whale dolphin is a species that the organization has never witnessed in Santa Monica Bay and the Dall's porpoise is also very rare.

Both species are commonly found in much deeper waters and the society was fascinated by the visit.

"We've never seen them in the bay," said Ocean Conservation Society president Dr. Maddalena Bearzi of the northern right whale dolphin observation. "It's a species we'd usually see more offshore."

"We've seen the Dall's porpoises a few times in the last month and that's also a species usually seen more offshore."

During a survey that the society regularly conducts to collect research for the analysis of the various species of dolphins and other marine life in the Santa Monica Bay, the Ocean Conservation team was traveling out near the area of Point Dume expecting to find common dolphins when they came across the Dall's porpoises.

Not long after the sighting of Dall's, the team came across the northern right whale dolphin communing with a group of Risso's dolphins, which is yet another species that has been seldom seen in the area recently.

"We used to see the Rissos before the last El Niño and they disappeared completely from the bay," said Bearzi. "We've had almost no sightings in the bay until a couple of weeks ago."

Since these sightings are new, there isn't much to go on and the Conservation Society is still working to understand why these animals are suddenly showing up in areas where they never have before.

Any substantial explanation will have to involve many more observations and research, but the preliminary hypothesis is that the inshore conditions are more suitable for the dolphins' needs.

"It's probably related to water temperature and food," said Ocean Conservation Society co-founder Charles Saylan. "It's hard to say, based on one sighting, and we haven't really manipulated that data yet, so we really don't know."

The Ocean Conservation Society is currently working on three separate dolphin projects in Santa Monica Bay.

The projects include a study of the local bottlenose dolphins and how they relate to the overall health of the ocean, how coastal pollution is affecting our marine mammals and how the various local forms of marine life aggregate.

The latter is a study that has never been explored by other researchers.

"These are animals that live in an extremely complex society — in many aspects it is similar to ours," said Bearzi. "Only by monitoring the population for a very long time can you start to have a little bit of understanding of what's going on in the bay."

"In our seven years of study here in these waters, we have discovered many things, but we're still at the beginning of what we need to know."

Since the organization is nonprofit, it is always battling the challenges of funding, which led it to spearhead a program called Adopt a Dolphin.

The program allows people interested in conservation and research of our local dolphin population to become involved by donating \$50 to adopt one of six local dolphins that they regularly track and whose names appear on the society's Web site.

"We send them a package with stickers and all kinds of stuff inside — it's really cute," said Bearzi. "It can help us to support the research, and all the money goes exclusively for the purpose of continuing the research."

For more information on our local dolphin and marine life, log onto the Web site at www.oceanconservation.org