

# GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

## Bottlenose Dolphin

*Tursiops truncatus*

### Range/Habitat

- The bottlenose dolphin is found in tropical and temperate seas worldwide.
- The species occurs in coastal and inshore areas and sometimes offshore over the edge of the continental shelf.
- This dolphin commonly is seen in lagoons, bays and river mouths. It occasionally may ascend rivers for short distances.

### Physical Characteristics

- The bottlenose dolphin ranges in color from light gray to nearly black on the back and sides, fading to white (sometimes with a pinkish hue) on the belly.
- The belly and lower sides are sometimes spotted and a dark stripe extends from the eye to the flipper. There may be brushings of gray on the body and face.
- There are large variations in coloration by geographic region.
- Adults range in size from about 6.0 to 12.5 feet (1.8-3.8 m) and can weigh approximately 485 to 1,430 lbs. (220-650 kg). Sizes vary widely according to region: those in the Pacific are larger than those in the Atlantic.
- Adult males are somewhat larger than females.
- Length at birth is 3 to 4 feet (1.0-1.2 m). Birth weights range from 30 to 50 lbs. (13.6-22.7 kg).
- This species of dolphin has 18 to 26 pairs of teeth in each jaw.

### Diet/Feeding

- The bottlenose dolphin feeds on squid, shrimp, eels and a wide variety of fishes. It is an opportunistic predator, consuming whatever suitable prey is most abundant at the time.
- Feeding behavior varies, ranging from cooperative foraging on schooling fish to individually chasing fish onto mud banks.
- This species will follow shrimp trawlers or other fishing vessels to consume by-catch that is discarded overboard. It also takes fish caught in gill nets.
- It is estimated that in the wild an adult consumes 15 to 30 lbs. (7-14 kg) of food daily. It swallows its food whole.

### Conservation Status

- The bottlenose dolphin is not included on the IUCN Red List
- The species is protected in the U.S. under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

### Additional Information

- The bottlenose dolphin is a very social species. It occurs in groups of up to 20 individuals, but large aggregations of several hundred are found offshore.
- In some areas, groups exhibit a limited home range; in other locations they are migratory, and have been observed to undertake journeys of over 300 miles (500 km).
- Movements are related to searching for prey and seeking out preferred water temperatures.
- It is often seen traveling with pilot whales, humpback whales and other dolphin species.

- The bottlenose dolphin is known for its wide range of vocalizations, including whistles, grunts, trills, squeaks and moans. It communicates with other dolphins in order to hunt efficiently, raise its young and guard against predators.
- Some scientists hypothesize that it has a complex language and that each individual has its own distinctive whistle used to communicate information on its identity, location and condition to other dolphins. A young dolphin develops its signature whistle based on that of its mother and maintains it throughout its life.
- The dolphin also uses click-like pulses produced by nasal sacs in its forehead for echolocation. The bounce-back from these signals is received by fat-filled cavities in the lower jaw bone and transmitted to the brain. This allows the animal to locate prey, identify predators and navigate in the dark or in murky water.
- Echolocation allows it to determine size, shape, speed, distance, direction and even some of the internal structure of objects in the water.
- This dolphin has ten times the brain area dedicated to acoustical imaging as do humans. In contrast, its centers for visual imaging are only 10% that of humans. This indicates the relative importance of hearing and sight to this animal.
- The brain of the bottlenose dolphin is larger than that of a human of comparable size.
- Adults of this species can maintain a cruising swim speed of about 3 to 7 mph (5-11 kph). Individuals can achieve bursts of 18 to 22 mph (29-35 kph).
- The dolphin typically only dives to about 150 feet (46 m), but has been observed to reach depths of about 2,300 feet (701 m).
- This marine mammal can hold its breath for an average of 8 to 10 minutes and for a maximum period of about 12 minutes.
- Male bottlenose dolphins will fight over females during breeding season. A hierarchy based on size is established among males in this manner.
- Courting involves rubbing, jaw clapping, stroking and nuzzling between male and female. The mated couple will pair-bond briefly.
- Gestation is about 12 months, and mother and calf remain closely associated for about 4 to 5 years.
- Females reach sexual maturity at 5 to 12 years of age, males at 9 to 13 years.
- The lifespan of the Atlantic bottlenose dolphin in the wild is between 25 and 30 years. Marineland in Florida has a female dolphin that was born at the facility in 1953 and several others that are between 30 and 50 years old.
- The bottlenose dolphin was first used in an oceanarium show in 1949. It is currently the most common dolphin species in captivity.
- Although protected in many countries, the bottlenose dolphin is killed by fishermen in some locations who believe that it is stealing the catch from their nets or depleting their target species. The species also is accidentally caught in a variety of fishing gear.
- There are about 30 species of true dolphins: 26 marine species and four river dolphins.
- The dolphin belongs to a different family (Delphinidae) than the porpoise (Phocoenidae). There are obvious differences between the two animals: (1) The dolphin has a long beak and a melon, the porpoise has neither; (2) The dorsal fin of the dolphin is curved or hook-shaped, that of the porpoise is triangular; (3) The dolphin has peg-shaped teeth, those of the porpoise are spade-shaped; (4) The dolphin forms groups, the porpoise usually is seen alone or in pairs; (5) The dolphin performs acrobatics and leaps out of the water, the porpoise does not.

### Sources

[www.seaworld.org/animal-info/info-book/bottlenose/](http://www.seaworld.org/animal-info/info-book/bottlenose/)

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