

Environmental Corner - Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)



Every summer, beachgoers look forward to seeing Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin swimming to-and-fro in the waves off the coastline at Bethany Beach. These magnificent and playful marine mammals can be seen most days, bobbing up and down, often in search of schools of fish. Dolphins are a member of the toothed class of whales, with hair and lungs, and which give birth to live calves and subsequently nurse them like a typical mammal.

Dolphins possess a long nose or beak and display a curved dorsal fin while porpoises have a blunt head profile and a triangular dorsal fin. Dolphins are considered to be intelligent marine mammals, and use what is referred to as “echolocation” to make whistles, squeaks, moans, trills, and clicks produced by sphincter muscles in their blowholes. Interestingly, the clicking sounds dolphins make bounce off objects in the ocean and provide information about the size, location, and distance of the objects. This built-in natural sonar system is especially useful in murky waters and at night. These dolphins travel in “pods” of up to 15 individuals and “herds”, a collection of pods, up to 100 or more individuals. Bottlenose dolphins leave the Bethany Beach area in October/November and swim south in search of warmer waters, only to return to our shores in the Spring following schools of fish migrating north.

- Lifespan - 25-30 years in the wild; 40 years in captivity
- Female dolphins give birth every 2-3 years
- Size: calves, 2-3 feet long and 25-40 pounds; adults 7-10 feet; 300-500 pounds
- Body temperature is ~97.7
- Swimming power is provided by the caudal fin which moves up and down
- Adults eat fish and crustaceans, 13-20 pounds/day
- Adults eat about 5% of their body weight per DAY
- Dolphins swallow their food whole, and their stomach has three chambers, which aids their digestion
- Because they consciously breathe, dolphins have to shut down one hemisphere of their brains in order to stay alive while sleeping. While resting, the other half of the brain monitors what’s going in the environment and controls breathing functions
- Diving: up to 200 feet; can hold breath 8-10 minutes and regulate heartbeat
- Sleep: 3-5 minute catnaps during the day; 8 minute naps at night
- Atlantic bottlenose dolphins have between 80 -100 conical teeth

- Swimming speed: typically, 5-7 miles per hour; have been clocked at 18-22; rare reports up to 30mph

According to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), “*bottlenose dolphins in the United States are not endangered or threatened, but they are protected under the [Marine Mammal Protection Act](#). They are vulnerable to many stressors and threats including disease, biotoxin, pollution, habitat alteration, vessel collisions, human feeding of and activities causing harassment, interactions with commercial and recreational fishing, energy exploration and oil spills, and other types of human disturbance (such as underwater noise)*”.

For more information on Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, please visit the websites below:

NOAA: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/common-bottlenose-dolphin>

BEACHNET: <https://www.beach-net.com/whats-here/dolphins.php>

Texas State Aquarium: <https://www.texasstateaquarium.org/facts-about-atlantic-bottlenose-dolphins/>