



WILD DOLPHIN BEHAVIORS

WHAT ARE NATURAL BEHAVIORS?

Bottlenose dolphins exhibit a variety of natural behaviors, which are essential for survival and success in dolphin communities. The following behaviors are commonly seen in Florida waters.

TRAVELING



Travel is characterized by persistent movement in a consistent direction. Dolphins may travel alone or in groups.

RESTING



Resting may resemble traveling, but is characterized by tight group formation and slow, methodical breath intervals.

MATERNAL CARE



While swimming, calves maintain “baby position” — mom surfaces first, and the baby surfaces slightly after and behind. Calves are dependent upon their mothers for several years.

FORAGING AND FEEDING

Bottlenose dolphins use a variety of techniques to pursue and capture prey.



Herding fish into a tight group and then striking from below. This may often be associated with feeding birds.



Fish tossing.



Diving and chasing after prey.

SOCIALIZING

Social interactions involve breeding, playing, aggression, and gentle body contact, such as rubbing. It can be difficult to distinguish between these behaviors because of splashing. The following are some examples:





WHAT IS DISTURBANCE?

Disturbance occurs when an animal's natural behaviors are disrupted. Chronic disturbance may lead to long-term negative impacts, such as compromised health, stress, injury, reduced reproductive success, and displacement from, or avoidance of, important habitats.

Some natural behaviors are more vulnerable to disturbance than others, such as feeding and resting. Maternal care is also particularly vulnerable to disturbance — extra care should be taken while viewing dolphin mothers and calves.

WHAT CAUSES DISTURBANCE?

Wild dolphins can be easily disturbed by the presence of people and watercraft, especially when approached too closely, quickly, or noisily for short or extended durations. Too many vessels approaching at the same time or in sequence can also cause disturbance.

WHAT ARE SIGNS OF DISTURBANCE?

Any abrupt change to natural behaviors constitutes disturbance. The following are additional signs of disturbance:

- ◇ Abrupt changes in speed or direction of travel, including underwater course changes
- ◇ Repeated tail slapping, breaching, or chuffing (loud exhalations) at surface
- ◇ Rapid swimming at surface
- ◇ Repeatedly turning or moving away from vessel
- ◇ Female attempting to shield calf with her body
- ◇ Abrupt changes in group spacing (e.g., groups splitting apart or moving closer together)



Rapid swimming at surface away from vessel(s).



Repeated breaching.



Mom shielding calf from vessel(s) with body and movements.



Repeated tail slaps.

TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING VIEWING WHILE MINIMIZING DISTURBANCE

- 1) Follow the National Marine Fisheries Service's Southeast Regional Viewing Guidelines and all Dolphin SMART program criteria.
- 2) Use binoculars for best viewing.
- 3) Change RPMs gradually when moving vessel in vicinity of dolphin(s).
- 4) When maneuvering vessel, maintain a position slightly behind and parallel to the dolphins' direction of movement. Avoid moving ahead or crossing in front of dolphin(s).
- 5) If a dolphin(s) approaches the vessel, put engine in neutral and remain in neutral while dolphin(s) are present.
- 6) If the dolphin(s) is not visible or resighted, be patient, and involve guests in locating them. If unsure of the dolphins' location when departing, go slowly. Dolphins can hold their breath for 5 - 7 minutes.
- 7) If another vessel is actively viewing a dolphin(s), find an alternate location and dolphin(s) to view responsibly.

REMEMBER, IT IS AGAINST FEDERAL LAW TO FEED OR HARASS WILD DOLPHINS