

# ALBINO DOLPHIN IN NORTHERN GULF OF MEXICO



## Background

An albino bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) calf was first photographed in June 2007, at Calcasieu Lake, an estuary in southwestern Louisiana. The photographs were widely circulated on the Internet, and continue being circulated due to the rare occurrence of albino dolphins. Although the dolphin is often referred to as a “pink” dolphin because of its pink coloration, it is considered an albino. The mother dolphin is not an albino and has the gray coloring typical of coastal bottlenose dolphins. Dolphin calves are typically born dark gray in color.

There have only been two other documented sightings of albino bottlenose dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico. The first was reported during the summer of 1994 in Little Lake near New Orleans, Louisiana. The all-white dolphin was spotted in a group of 4-5 individuals, but was only seen for 20 to 30 minutes and never seen again. Another all white dolphin calf was first observed in a group of more than 40 dolphins south of Galveston, Texas in September 2003. It was resighted several times in the same vicinity through August 2004 (Fertl *et al.*, 1999; Fertl *et al.*, 2004).

## Sighting History of Albino Dolphin

Since the initial sighting in June, 2007, NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) has received three verified sighting reports of the mother and albino calf:

- September 19, 2007. Lake Calcasieu, Louisiana. A Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist sighted and photographed the albino dolphin calf and mother adjacent to Monkey Island in the river connection from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Calcasieu.
- October 15, 2007. Calcasieu Ship Channel, Louisiana. A Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist sighted the albino calf traveling with other dolphins within the Calcasieu ship channel.
- December 5, 2007. Calcasieu Ship Channel, Louisiana. A Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist sighted the albino calf traveling with five other dolphins within the lower Calcasieu ship channel .

## Responsible Dolphin Viewing Tips

Dolphins in the wild always generate interest among boaters and the public, particularly if the dolphin is as unusual as this albino calf. **NOAA Fisheries Service is stressing the importance of responsibly viewing wild marine mammals by asking the public to follow these guidelines:**

- Observe wild dolphins from a safe distance of at least 50 yards
  - Use binoculars or telephoto lenses for a better view of the animals
  - Limit overall viewing time to no more than 30 minutes
- Responsible Dolphin Viewing Tips continued on the back of fact sheet.**



Photo: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

**If you spot this albino bottlenose dolphin contact  
Michele Kelley, Louisiana State Marine  
Mammal Stranding  
Coordinator, at (504) 235-3005**

## Responsible Dolphin Viewing Tips Continued

- Travel in a predictable manner and do not attempt to herd, chase, or separate groups of marine mammals. Do not separate mothers and calves.
- Avoid circling or entrapping marine mammals between watercraft, or watercraft and the shore
- Avoid abrupt movements or loud noises around marine mammals
- Move away cautiously if behaviors are observed that indicate the animal is stressed or disturbed [e.g., tail slap, repeated breaching, or forceful exhale (chuff, which sounds like a cough)].
- Avoid touching or swimming with wild marine mammals, even if they approach you
- Do not feed or attempt to feed dolphins in the wild. Federal law prohibits feeding or attempting to feed marine mammals.
- To report marine mammal violations such as feeding, touching, or chasing wild dolphins, please contact the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline: 1-800-853-1964.

For further information see NOAA Fisheries Service's Marine Mammal & Sea Turtle Viewing Guidelines: <http://nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/southeast/>

## Albinism in Marine Mammals

In 1851, Herman Melville introduced the world to a fictional albino whale named Moby Dick. Since then, some non-fiction cases of albinism in marine mammals have been highly publicized. For example, Carolina Snowball was a popular albino bottlenose dolphin displayed at the Miami Seaquarium in the early 1960's. In addition, an albino humpback whale named Migaloo has been spotted off the coast of Australia over the past 15 years. Overall 20 species of whales, dolphins, and porpoises have been observed with occurrences of anomalously white individuals. However, throughout the world, there have only been 14 recorded sightings of albino bottlenose dolphins since the first in 1962. The rarity of albinism in marine animals has made these sightings particularly fascinating to the public (Hain and Leatherwood, 1982; Fertl *et al.*, 1999; Fertl *et al.*, 2004).

Very little is known about albino dolphins due to their extreme rarity. What is known about albinism comes from humans. Albinism is a genetic predisposition, expressed as a lack of melanin pigments within the body. Most forms of albinism are a result of the biological inheritance of genetically recessive genes passed from both parents to an individual, though some rare forms are inherited from only one parent. This genetic trait is characterized by white or light skin and hair, the appearance of pink or red eye coloring and often-impaired vision. Depending on the degree of albinism, an organism may have all or only some of these traits.



Photo: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

### Sources:

- Fertl, D., Pusser, L.T. and J.J. Long. 1999. First record of an albino bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) in the Gulf of Mexico, with a review of anomalously white cetaceans. *Marine Mammal Science* 15(1): 227-234.
- Fertl, D., Barros, N.B., Rowlett, R.A., Estes, S. and M. Richlen. 2004. An update on anomalously white cetaceans, including the first account for the pantropical spotted dolphin (*Stenella attenuata graffmani*). *Latin American Journal of Aquatic Mammals* 3(2): 163-166.
- Hain, J.H.W. and S. Leatherwood. 1982. Two sightings of white pilot whales, *Globicephala melaena*, and summarized records of anomalously white cetaceans. *Journal of Mammalogy* 63(2): 338-343.