

A Friendly Dolphin in Norway

Jaap van der Toorn, Jolanda van der Toorn and Tom Schopen (1992)

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It was a quiet day on the beach. It was still early and it wasn't very sunny yet. We had a nice view on the quiet waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Suddenly a dark shadow shot through the water, clearly visible against the light sandy bottom. A short, powerful exhalation completed the picture: a dolphin was heading for the beach. Excitedly a number of people ran into the cold water. This was what the dolphin was looking for: playtime! He quietly made his rounds, dividing his attention between all the people who had taken the trouble of welcoming him.



Figure 1: Flipper cruising



Figure 2: Flipper's face

Nice story, huh? It happened last August on the beach of Ferkingstad Havn on the isle of Karmøy, just north of Stavanger in Norway. Last year, a solitary bottlenose dolphin appeared near Karmøy. He (the local people called him Flipper) swam alongside boats and surfboards. Gradually he began to take more liberties, pushing surfers off their boards. After some time he came closer to the beach and started playing with swimmers. He was especially interested in air mattresses. Strangely enough Flipper stayed near Karmøy throughout the winter,

although the water temperature dropped to about 6 C (43 F), which is pretty cold for a bottlenosed dolphin. And he is still there.

In the beginning of August we went to meet Flipper. He is a pretty big male bottlenose dolphin (about 3.5 meters or 11 foot 6 inches). We estimated his weight to be around 400 kilos (880 pounds). He must be at least 25 years old, although it is very difficult to estimate his age. His skin is a very dark color, a kind of dark brown and he has quite a lot of scars. These scars are all fairly old, which indicates that he hasn't had any contact with other dolphins recently. It is fairly easy to recognize him, because he has a prominent scar on his lower jaw, a light patch around his blowhole and his flukes are pretty ragged. Because he is so easy to recognize, even for inexperienced observers, we can be pretty sure that we are dealing with only one dolphin here.



Figure 3: The tail flukes are quite unique and can help identify Flipper



Figure 4: Flipper interacting with Jolanda

When we were there, Flipper appeared towards the end of the morning on one of two beaches. If there were people to play with on the first beach, he stayed there until after 6 pm. He never stayed long with one person or group of persons. He divided his attention between all those present in the water. It didn't really matter if you were swimming, snorkeling or diving or floating around on an air mattress or in a boat. When we were diving, Flipper displayed an intense interest in our fins. He was inspecting them closely and he often pushed against them. Every now and then he stopped in front of us and blew bubbles, apparently imitating the stream of air from our regulators.

Usually he just swam around quietly, but every now and then he went into a sexual frenzy and tried to rape an air mattress. Even in those frenzies, he never was a threat to the people around. He has had quite a lot of experience in dealing with people by now and he probably knows what he can and cannot do.



Figure 5: Flipper and Jolanda underwater

All in all it was a very positive experience for us to be able to swim and dive with Flipper. Quite a lot of people in Norway have had the opportunity to meet him by now and all of them were thrilled. We certainly hope to meet him again.

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Color photos have been added specifically for this web version