Dolphins

In the Gulf of Mexico: Bottlenose Dolphin (Tursiops truncatus), Striped Dolphin (Stenella coeruleoalba), Fraser’s Dolphin (Lagenodelphis hosei), Melon-headed Whale (Peponocephala electra), Rissø’s Dolphin (Grampus griseus), Pygmy Killer Whale (Feresa attenuata), Orca (Orcinus Orca), Atlantic Spotted Dolphin (Stenella frontalis), Spinner Dolphin (Stenella longirostris), Cymene Dolphin (Stenella clymene), False Killer Whale (Pseudorca crassidens), Rough-toothed Dolphin (Steno bredanensis), Pantropical Spotted Dolphin (Stenella attenuata), Short-finned Pilot Whale (Glomaracheca macrocephalus)

The word, dolphin, refers to small cetaceans with beak-like snouts. However, this word can be ambiguous. Some dolphins, such as killer whales, do not have pronounced rostrums. All dolphins do have a well-developed melon, a lens-shaped fatty deposit, that gives them the appearance of a forehead. This melon aids in echolocation; it focuses sounds from the blowhole into a concentrated beam. Dolphins are some of the smallest species of whales. They are the largest and most diverse cetacean family, comprised of about 32 species. Most live in large groups called schools or pods, which allow them to be more efficient hunters and more effective in avoiding predators. Females are usually smaller than males. Dolphins are known to display altruistic behavior. This means they will help another individual or even a member of another species without gaining any benefits themselves. Ape and humans are the only other species that have been found to exhibit true altruism.

Florida Manatees

Members of the order Sirenia (manatees and dugongs) are the only completely aquatic, herbivorous mammals. While they do not echolocate, Florida manatees make sounds underwater. These sounds are used to contact other manatees and communicate basic behavioral information. Florida manatees have an indefinite number of molar-like teeth. As old teeth become worn in the front of the mouth, they can be continuously replaced by new ones from the back of the mouth. Manatees have only six cervical vertebrae; this number is unique among mammals. Florida manatees can be found from Florida to Texas during the warmer months of the year. Because these animals are highly susceptible to cold temperatures, they reside in Florida inland and coastal waters during the winter months. Florida manatees are classified as an endangered species and are further protected by the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Protection Act of 1978. Manatee populations in the wild are determined by counting these animals in their wintering sites. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission have discovered the Florida manatee population to be a minimum of 3,802 individuals. Declining populations are due to collisions by watercraft or propeller injuries, crushing by locks, and/or entanglement in nets and fishing gear. Habitat loss and low reproductive rates are other factors affecting these populations.

Marine Manimal Quick Facts

- All dolphins are whales, but not all whales are dolphins.
- Pygmy and dwarf sperm whales secrete an ink-like substance, like squid, when avoiding predators.
- There are no porpoise species in the Gulf of Mexico.
- The largest population of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins lives in the Gulf of Mexico.
- When first spotted by early explorers, manatees were believed to be mermaids.
- The closest living relatives of manatees and dugongs are elephants.
- Most baleen whales have two blowholes.
- Florida manatees have nails on their flippers.

Remember

The Institute for Marine Mammal Studies (IMMS) is a non-profit organization established in 1984 for the purpose of public education, conservation, and research of marine mammals and sea turtles in the wild and under human care. Located in Gulfport, MS, IMMS has been an active participant in the National Stranding Network since its inception. IMMS is the premiere organization in the Mississippi-Louisiana-Alabama sub-region of the Gulf Coast with the capability and experience to care for sick and injured marine mammals and sea turtles. Additionally, IMMS promotes public awareness of marine conservation issues through its involvement in the community.

Marine Mammals of the Gulf of Mexico

Prepared by Dennis McGrury, 2012

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The Basics

Approximately 27 species of marine mammals inhabit the Gulf of Mexico. The numbers continue to increase as more marine mammals are discovered in this body of water. Some species are residents while others migrate through this area. There are species of baleen whales, toothed whales and dolphins, as well as manatees. Marine mammals that live in the Gulf of Mexico are completely aquatic, meaning they spend their entire lives in the water. They have adaptations that allow them to survive in this environment, such as:

- modified limbs, or flippers, to aid in swimming;
- layers of thick blubber or fat to keep them warm in cold waters;
- bodies that are mostly hairless, thereby reducing drag for enhanced water flow over their bodies;
- sound production that allows them to communicate with each other; and
- abilities to remain submerged for long periods of time.

Protection

All marine mammals that reside in the Gulf of Mexico are under the protection of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 administered by NOAA. Manatees, however, are under jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Endangered or threatened marine mammals are further protected by the Endangered Species Act. Marine mammals are protected from hunting, harassment, capturing, killing, collecting, or attempting to do any of these things. Violation of these laws is punishable by a fine up to $25,000 and/or imprisonment up to one year per each act.

Baleen Whales

In the Gulf of Mexico: Minkes Whale (Balaenoptera acutorostrata), Bryde's Whale (Balaenoptera edeni), Sei Whale (Balaenoptera borealis), Fin Whale (Balaenoptera physalus), Humpback Whale (Megaptera novaeangliae), North Atlantic Right Whale (Eubalaena glacialis)

Baleen whales are the largest mammals known to man. Some of these majestic giants were hunted almost to extinction. Because they are now protected, these populations are slowly rebounding. Although most eat primarily plankton (microscopic plants or animals) and krill (small crustaceans), a few species eat small fish. Baleen whales of the Gulf of Mexico have adopted different feeding strategies depending on the organisms they consume. One feeding strategy is to swim along the surface of the water allowing water and plankton to flow into the mouth. Water sifts through the baleen trapping the organisms inside the mouth which are removed from the baleen by the tongue. Another feeding strategy is to gulp large amounts of water and krill or fish, then the water is forced from the mouth through the baleen trapping the food inside where it can be swallowed. Baleen whales also produce low frequency sounds which are believed to be used for identification, navigation, mating calls, and location of other individuals.

Toothed Whales

In the Gulf of Mexico: Gervais' Beaked Whale (Mesoplodon europaeus), Blainville's Beaked Whale (Mesoplodon densirostris), Cuvier’s Beaked Whale (Ziphius cavirostris), Sperm Whale (Physeter macrocephalus), Pygmy Sperm Whale (Kogia breviceps), Dwarf Sperm Whale (Kogia sima)

As the name implies, all toothed whales have dentition. Most species have uniformed, conical (cone-shaped) teeth. However, in certain species, like the beaked whales, only the males have teeth. Toothed whales use their teeth only to catch and tear food, not to chew it. Most diets consist of fish, squid, or smaller mammals. It is believed all toothed whales use echolocation to detect prey and navigate. Echolocation is the practice of producing high frequency sound waves and listening for echoes to determine location and identity of objects. While toothed whales use echolocation to detect prey, scientists believe some may use high frequency sounds to stun prey as well. Many toothed whales are deep divers and can reach depths of over 1,000 meters. While diving, toothed whales accumulate extra oxygen in their muscles and blood, reduce their heart rate in order to conserve oxygen, and direct blood flow to vital organs. Also, toothed whales do not suffer from the bends (increased amounts of nitrogen in the blood which results from surfaced too quickly during deep dives).