

Dolphins

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from places like Torrance beach.

The bottlenose, less common and relatively new to the Santa Monica Bay, get more attention because these 9-foot-long mammals have notched and nicked dorsal fins distinctive enough to be read like fingerprints by researchers.

With clear pictures, Bearzi for example can match up the images to other photos, give the dolphin a name and see if the animal has been sighted locally year-round. Among other things, that gives clues about the range and migratory habits of the animal.

And aside from pure science, the research project is trying to raise awareness of the marine mammals right off our coast.

"Eighty to 90 percent of the time we talk to people, they say, 'There's dolphins in the bay?'" Saylen said.

Bearzi was sailing with Saylen one day in 1996 when she noticed the large schools of dolphins. Bearzi, new to the area, thought it was odd that there had been no concentrated study of the local dolphin population. Thus was born the L.A. Dolphin Project. Later, Saylen and Bearzi formed the Ocean Conservation Society, a nonprofit group, to help fund the research. Saylen is executive director of the society.

Bearzi, who is working on her Ph.D. at UCLA, has set up the project to observe all marine mammals and their interaction with seals, sea lions and birds in the bay.

On a weekly basis, sometimes more frequently, the project's trained researchers and volunteers travel the coast from Point Dume to Point Vicente and back out into the harbor.

They have a special permit to track the dolphins, as all marine mammals are protected from hunting and harassment.

If they encounter a dolphin school, they will follow and gather data for about a half-hour, recording the leaping, breaching and head-slapping. They will look for calves and for bow-riding, when dolphins hitch a ride on the water pushed along in front of the boat.

After three years, the project has amassed 15,000 photos, hour upon hour of video and mega-



ANDREA ROTH /STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Andrea Bachman, a researcher with the nonprofit Ocean Conservation Society, enters data into a computer. The society is enlisting volunteers to watch the bottlenose from the beach.

bytes of data.

This is a busy time for the project. At the end of August, Bearzi will complete a research paper on local dolphins, their migratory habits or lack of them, and the size of the population.

Saylen and Bearzi also are enlisting volunteers to watch the bottlenose from the beach, generating still more data. "With some help from the land-based survey, we can have a pretty good grip of dolphins in the bay," Saylen said.

The land-based effort also will give the Ocean Conservation Society the chance to reach out to more people, especially young students. Saylen hopes to make education a major part of the group's efforts.

The group also is in the midst of adding new equipment, a bio-acoustic monitor to the boat that will record the sounds of the marine mammals, and new computer software that will help match dorsal fin photo IDs.

Dolphins in the bay are ripe for a study project like this, said John Heyning, deputy director of research and collection for the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

"We have a large mammal — the bottlenose dolphin — living within the eyesight of millions of people in L.A. County, and nobody knows anything about them," said Heyning, who serves as scientific adviser to the Dolphin Project.

The bottlenose weren't in the Santa Monica Bay until the El

Niño of 1982-83, Heyning said. Previously, they ranged from Orange County south. Since they moved north, they now stretch all the way to Santa Cruz.

Tracking the presence of dolphins and correlating it with water temperature, interaction with other animals, and with each other, over a period of several years, as Bearzi plans, will be a valuable database, Heyning said.

"It's an extremely worthwhile project," Heyning said.

A baseline set of data on the dolphins would be interesting, but it would have to be from several years of observation, said Alisa Schulman-Janiger of the Los Angeles chapter of the American Cetacean Society. That's so the animal can be observed in typical years, as well as the recent El Niño-La Niña cycle of fluctuating sea temperatures.

Since the bottlenose are a coastal species, they are more affected impacted by human activities. These animals are a kind of barometer of what's going on with the ecosystem, said Schulman-Janiger, an expert on killer whales and director of the Point Vicente Gray Whale Census Project, so it is important to learn about them. Previously, studies of bottlenose have concentrated on the coastlines of San Diego and Orange counties.

Reach the Ocean Conservation Society and L.A. Dolphin Project through the Internet at www.oceanconservation.org or 310-822-5205.