DOLPHINS AND DISTRACTION
Margot Demopoulos

One cold winter morning in the coastal waters off Los Angeles, local researchers from UCLA were tracking a school of bottlenose dolphins. Their boat carried cameras, hydrophones, and computers.

Field biologist, Maddalena Bearzi, was photo-identifying the school, as she recounts in Beautiful Minds, the Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins. She was taking pictures of each individual in the group, using the scars and notches in the fins as are as distinctive as human fingerprints. The dolphins were foraging for prey, heading north along the Santa Monica beach, stopping on occasion to dive and search. As they encountered a large school of sardines just off Malibu pier...

“The fish were trapped ingeniously,” she writes, “as if in a net shaped by a tight formation of nine dolphins. After they began feeding, one of the dolphins in the group suddenly left the circle, swimming offshore at a high speed. In less than an instant, the other dolphins abandoned their prey to follow their companion.”

This was odd behavior for the dolphins, Bearzi notes.

“Usually they moved back and forth very close to the beach, taking the time to entirely deplete the school of fish on which they were dining while occasionally milling at the surface like a bunch of oversized floating buoys. To abruptly stop feeding and take off in an unrelated direction was rather peculiar.”

Distractions matter, and not just to dolphins. Writers of fiction know about straying from purpose. Not the coffee...