Bottlenose dolphins seen off Sonoma Coast part of closely watched northward push

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Dolphins play in the heavy tsunami surf at north Salmon Creek State Beach, Saturday, Jan. 15, 2022 north of Bodega Bay. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2022

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Stunning images of bottlenose dolphins leaping and surfing in heavy waves triggered by an underwater volcano earlier this month proved a surprise to some casual observers off the Sonoma Coast.

“What? We have dolphins now?” was one question posed as photos of the pod cavorting at Salmon Creek Beach near Bodega Bay made the rounds.

Yes, is the answer, but only over the past decade, as part of a closely watched shift in the range of near-shore dolphins long common to the warmer waters off Southern California and the border region of Mexico.

A pod of bottlenose dolphins play in the surf off Salmon Creek State Beach, Saturday, Jan. 15, 2022. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2022

A handful of residents at The Sea Ranch on the north Sonoma Coast got a show themselves in mid-January, when a pod of dolphins with a newborn calf spent most of the day frolicking off Walk On Beach.

“It was thrilling,” said Karen Wilkinson, who witnessed the event — her fifth experience seeing dolphins off the coast in that area.

California Coastal Bottlenose Dolphins, a genetically distinct stock estimated to number only about 650 individual animals, were not even documented north of Point Conception, near Santa Barbara, until 1983.

But with each pulse northward, typically during warm water events, the animals appear to adapt to their new surroundings and linger on, expanding their range by nearly 500 linear miles in less than 40 years.

“It’s a complicated and interesting story that’s unfolding right now in front of us,” said Bill Keener, a member of the Cetacean Field Research Team at The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito and leader of long-term study of the population’s range expansion. “But also, from a personal point of view, it’s really neat to be able to go out and see really interesting, big animals from the beach, from the headlands. To be able to see these guys go by. I just think it’s fascinating.”

Prodded northward in the past when marine temperatures rose, the projected increase of such events suggest additional progression in the future.

“If seas keep warming, they could make their march north,” Keener said.

Coastal bottlenose inhabit a very narrow band of water along the coast, he said. Their traditional range is from about Eseñada, in Baja California, to Point Conception.

From a few that strayed north to Monterey Bay during an El Niño event in 1983, they continued creeping north over the years, becoming increasingly common off the Central Coast.

The first was one was recorded in San Francisco Bay in 2001, where they became regulars around 2010, inspiring Keener, one-time director of The Marine Mammal Center, and a group of collaborators to launch a study that they hope to publish later this year.

A marine heat wave in the mid-2010s, sometimes known as "the warm blob," seems to have established the species on the Sonoma Coast, even though the first recorded sighting north of San Francisco Bay was a mere a decade ago, in July 2012.

That summer, a dolphin dubbed "Smootch," distinguished by its serrated dorsal fin and last observed in Southern California before that, was photographed off Doran Beach. She was spotted twice more closer to San Francisco Bay over the ensuing year.

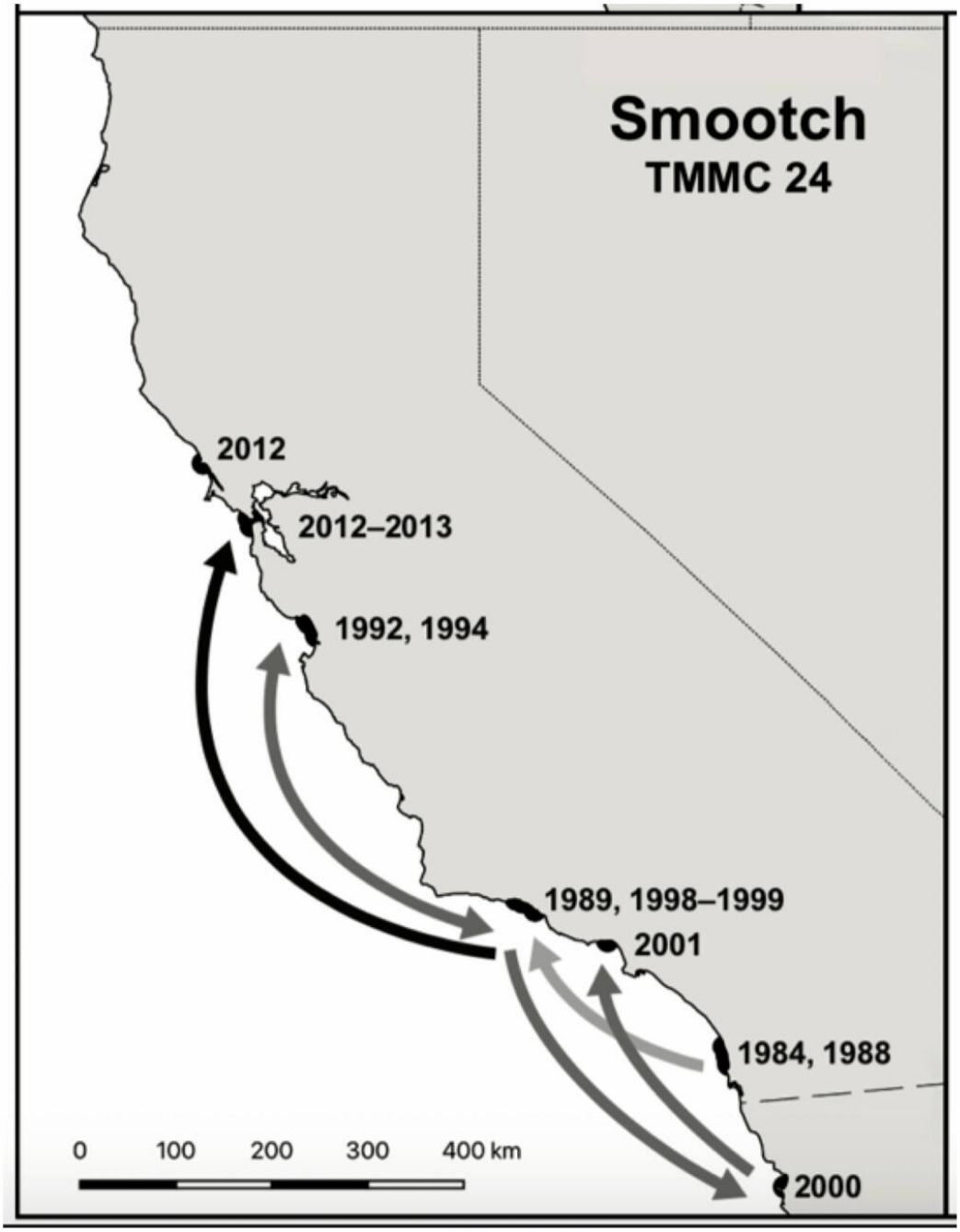
"Smootch," a California Coastal Bottlenose Dolphin identified by its dorsal fin notches and first recorded in 1984 in Southern California, was the first documented bottlenose to arrive off the Sonoma Coast, photographed here near Doran Beach on July 27, 2012. (Photo by Darris Nelson.)

But it was in the following three years, during a prolonged marine heat wave that disrupted the entire marine environment — upending normal cycles, spurring marine mammal strandings and severe, sudden population shifts — that a sizable number hit the Sonoma Coast, Keener said.

Some went beyond, reaching Mendocino County briefly, while a few wandered clear to Puget Sound, in Washington State, including one nicknamed “Miss” and last seen that year.

The animals live up to 50 years, and their dorsal fins become so uniquely weathered, scarred and ragged that scientists are able to track them over time through distinguishing photographs.

About 120 bottlenose dolphins have been documented in the greater Bay Area, and about 453 have been cataloged in total, Keener said.



“Smootch,” the first California Coastal Bottlenose Dolphin documented off the Sonoma Coast, had a long history of recorded travels up and down California and Baja Mexico. (Bill Keener/The Marine Mammal Center)

That's how scientists know, for example, how well traveled Smootch was between 1984 and her last sighting in 2013.

It's possible bottlenose dolphins arrived off the Sonoma Coast well before Smootch was observed, but hadn't been identified, Keener said.

But since the "blob" they've become common enough that whale watcher Larry Tiller, a regular at Bodega Head, spots a pod off shore about every 10 days, bringing a thrill to any tourists in the vicinity.

"They're kind of excited by it," Tiller said. "They're genuinely happy to see them."

The dolphins were one of 67 warm-water species found off the Sonoma Coast during the marine heat wave, including 37 never before seen so far north, according to a study by Jackie Sones and colleagues at the UC Davis Bodega Marine Laboratory.

Only a handful of species have persisted in the area, where cool waters from a cold upwelling near Point Arena more typically prevail, including the bottlenose dolphins, a type of limpet and several other invertebrates, Sones said.

Experts say it's likely the dolphins' consistency in the area reflects their profound intelligence, allowing them to navigate unfamiliar risks and adapt to new foods, instead of withdrawing to the boundaries of their former range.

But Keener said they could still be vulnerable, given their small number and exposure to new pollutants and high traffic in San Francisco Bay and the coastal shipping lanes.

And yet, they seem to be learning, Keener said.

"We'd been looking at the coast for decades, and these guys weren't here," he said.

Tiller, a longtime volunteer with the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, sometimes saw dolphins off the mouth of the Russian River in years past, though he now sees them more commonly in the Bodega Bay area.

"It's always a surprise to see something new that you haven't seen before," he said.

Sea Ranch photographer Craig Tooley, who left the breakfast table to run to Walk On Beach when the dolphins showed up Jan. 12, said he's seen them about twice a year for the past few years but still found it hard to tear himself away after four hours or so of taking photos.

"It's amazing to watch them," he said.

Keener, who viewed photos of the 11 dolphins, was able to identify six of them, including one that had been documented in The Sea Ranch two years earlier.

Wilkinson, who submitted some photos, said it was amazing to contribute to the scientific record and to learn from Keener that “stripes” she had seen on a very young calf were, in fact, fetal folds indicative of its recent birth.

“it’s just incredible,” she said. “All of it.”

Keener welcomes citizen reports of bottlenose dolphins and photo submissions where appropriate. People can report a sighting at marinemammalcenter.org/report-an-animal/whale-dolphin-sightings.

You can reach Staff Writer Mary Callahan at 707-521-5249 or mary.callahan@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @MaryCallahanB.

Mary Callahan

Environment and Climate Change, The Press Democrat

I am in awe of the breathtaking nature here in Sonoma County and am so grateful to live in this spectacular region we call home. I am amazed, too, by the expertise in our community and by the commitment to protecting the land, its waterways, its wildlife and its residents. My goal is to improve understanding of the issues, to find hope and to help all of us navigate the future of our environment.