



Dolphins

Dolphins, along with their close relatives the whales, are considered to be the most intelligent creatures of the ocean. There are 40 different species of Dolphins in the world, all of which belong to the order Cetacea. Dolphins are mammals and are warm blooded, just like humans.

Dolphins have fast moving, streamlined bodies. They are equipped with a dorsal fin that aids stability and thermoregulation, two pectoral fins and a tail fluke, which all help them swim faster than many boats. The average Bottlenose Dolphin weighs around 200kg and is approximately 2-4 metres in length.

Dolphins need to come to the surface to breathe air, as they don't have gills like sharks and fish. They breathe through a blowhole in the centre of the melon- a swollen part of their head. The small muscular flap over the blowhole closes with muscular contraction and when the muscles are relaxed, the hole closes with a suction force. Dolphins can go without breathing for up to 15 minutes, but once they do, it takes 0.3 seconds to inhale and exhale.

Dolphins are great fishers due to their echolocation, which allows them to produce a wide range of different clicking sounds that are projected through airways in their nasal glands. This is not only used to communicate with other Dolphins, but it is also used to tell their prey's shape, size, direction, speed and distance. The sounds echo off a nearby prey so when it comes back to the Dolphin, it is received by the Dolphin's sonar to be analysed by the brain. Adult Dolphins eat around 15 kg of fish every single day, which means a lot of their time is spent hunting. They consume a wide assortment of fishes, crustaceans and squids, with some Dolphins diving up to 500 metres under water to catch fish.

A common misconception is calling a group of Dolphins a 'pod', however this is for families only. The correct term for a group of female Dolphins is a 'party' and a group of males is called an 'alliance'. Female Dolphins spend their lives looking after their calves, being pregnant, or swimming around with other females, whilst males are generally only seen with other males in their alliance. Female Dolphins take on the responsibility to teach their calves to fish, which is why specific fishing techniques are only seen along generations of females. These techniques can get quite innovative with some Dolphins launching themselves onto the beach. Dolphins start calving when they are around 6 years old and have multiple partners over their lifetime.

The species that are common to Ningaloo Reef are the Bottlenose Dolphin, Indo-Pacific Humpback, and Spinner Dolphins. Spinner Dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) are famous for their acrobatic ability to propel themselves high out of the water whilst spinning. Indo-pacific Humpback dolphins (*Sousa chinensis*) are also found in the Ningaloo Marine Park, well known for their change in colour as they age from grey to pinkish white. The most common of all the species of dolphin is the Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), which is found in all the world's oceans.

Did you know?

Dolphins, unlike humans have to consciously think about breathing. This means they have to sleep with one half of their brain resting at a time.