



Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network

Frequently Asked Questions:

What is Dolphin Count about?

Research has shown that there is little awareness in the Charleston community about our local dolphin population. There are approximately 300 individual dolphins that call Charleston home year-round. The aim of this event is to give a general “snapshot” of the dolphin population in the Charleston Harbor over a short period of time. As well as gaining valuable research data, we hope this event will raise awareness about the conservation of our marine environment. Marine mammal experts and trained volunteers will be at each station to give instructions, lead counts and will be prepared to answer questions about dolphins.

What species will I see?

The most common marine mammal we have in Charleston is Atlantic bottlenose dolphin (no porpoises!).

How will I know I see a dolphin and not a shark?

Sharks usually do not spend much time at the surface, whereas dolphins are required to come to the surface regularly to breathe from their blowhole located at the top of their head! Dolphins generally surface every few minutes to breathe although they can hold their breath for up to 10 minutes. Dolphins surface in a smooth, rolling forward motion.

What part of the dolphin will I be looking for?

When dolphins come up to the surface you will notice their dorsal fin is the most prominent body part above the water. The dorsal fin is a large, triangular fin on their back.

How will I know if a dolphin is a calf or an adult?

Calves are significantly smaller than their mothers, and swim in the echelon position, slightly behind and to the side of their mother. Adults are usually at least one and a half body lengths longer than their calves. Calves are never far from their mothers!

How many animals will I see during the Count?

This will depend on the day, weather and counting station. We chose sites with a high probability of sighting dolphins but there can be no guarantee. We anticipate you could see 0-20 dolphins during each count.

Where should I go?

Follow station instructions and meeting spots for each site. Look for LMMN volunteers wearing the #Locals t-shirts. Some sites are limited due to space, parking or allowance. Please allow extra time to park and reach your meeting spot before the top of the hour.



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Who can count?

Anyone! This is an all ages, no experience needed event. There will be a 15-20 training before each count with the counts starting promptly on the half hour. Please arrive a few minutes before each count (9,10,and 11am) for instructions.

Is it hard to record data?

We designed the datasheet to be very easy for anyone to count dolphins. Data will include weather, dolphin tally, calf tally and behavior notes.

What types of behaviors might I see?

Traveling: An animal moving in the same direction of travel without turning or stopping.

Splashing: Splashing can indicate feeding, socializing, or mating.

Feeding: Animals seen circling together, staying in one place, tail splashing, or strand feeding could be signs of feeding.

Resting: An animal staying at the surface without much movement could be an animal resting at the surface.

Courtship: Multiple dolphins pushing each other and rolling around in the water.

Aerial behavior: Dolphin(s) jumping out of water and landing headfirst or on their sides. Representative of a variety of behaviors!

What should I bring?

Please bring things for the outdoors- water, sunscreen, hats, binoculars, cameras. Binoculars will not be allowed during the timed count. Datasheets will be provided.

Do I still record data if I don't see any dolphins?

Yes. We need you to record when dolphins are present and also when they are absent. Negative data (when dolphins are not present) is really important to the project as it allows us to say something about how often dolphins are seen; making the positive data (when dolphins are seen) more valuable. Understanding which stations have the highest dolphin sighting will also help us understand "hotspots" for the dolphins which may indicate feeding, resting or mating areas for the dolphins.



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How do I count?

Each count will last 30 minutes. Each station will start counting promptly on the half hour. The count is only 30 minutes to help reduce double counting of dolphins at different stations. Stations are spaced approximately 1 mile apart to help reduce double counting as well. During the count, you'll scan the water from left to right looking for dolphins. Once an animal(s) is seen we'll count the number of animals and any calves present. We'll ask one person to follow this animal(s) as long as they can to help reduce double counting the same animal(s). If new animal(s) appear we will add them to the tally and continue to follow during the duration of the count. At the end of the 30 minutes, you'll need to record a minimum guess, a maximum guess and a best estimate of dolphins seen.

Can I help with more than one count?

Yes! You can help with one, two, or all three counts.

What happens after the count?

After the data has been gathered and recorded, we will send out a summary of the event to all participants.

For any other questions, email info@lmmn.org.