January 10,2026

10,000 ISLANDS DOLPHIN RESEARCH PROJECT

MARCO ISLAND, FLORIDA

2025 FOURTH QUARTER REPORT

OCTOBER 1 THRU DECEMBER 31

OBJECTIVE: The 10,000 Islands Dolphin Study Team monitors the travel range, social behavior, abundance, genealogy, feeding habits, survival rate, health and overall well-being of the local bottlenose dolphin population in the waters of north Marco Island Florida and surrounding vicinity. The study has a database of documented sightings dating back to its inception on February 6, 2006, and created a new, unique database in 2018 to detail more efficiently the above-mentioned criteria, and more. The enclosed information describes data compiled for the calendar period of October 1st thru December 31st of 2025 including an annual overview of 2025 results.

During this 3 month period the team experienced 110 excursions with a total of 1,481 documented sightings of more than 135 identified, local dolphin for an average of 14 dolphins per excursion.

For the entire 2025 year the team thad 407 excursions and documented 6,468 identified sightings for an average of 16 dolphins per excursion. The 2024 annual total was 449 excursions documenting 5,079 identified sightings for an average of 11 dolphins per excursion. The 2023 annual total was 434 excursions documenting 4,763 identified subjects for an average of 11 dolphins per excursion.

The increase in sightings can be attested to the fact that we recorded 20 new calves born in 2023 and 2024 and, since our dolphins are a local, residential species, these calves were seen quite often in our survey area.

ECOSYSTEM: The 10,000 islands and Rookery Bayare primarily a red mangrove forest with shallow water surroundings. Before human development in our study area, dolphins fed around the base of these islands, on the sandbars and the mudflats. The introduction of civilization produced additional foraging opportunities with docks, seawalls and canals. With an abundance of food in the habitat the bottlenose dolphin population does not migrate and great distance from our survey area, but some do have an extensive travel range. These are a residential, coastal species, ranging in age from newborn calves to the elderly adults. This local population will consume approximately 1 ton of fish per day.

FEEDING: Many of our subjects feed individually along the base of the mangrove islands and on the shallow sandbars. They do not require a pod structure as witnessed in offshore societies because of the shallow waters. They also trap fish along the seawalls. On occasion, small groups will work together to herd fish to sandbars or to shorelines for an easier catch. Strand feeding has been observed periodically along particular mudflats.

IDENTIFICATION: Our dolphins are identified by the nips and nicks on their dorsal fins, as this fin is seen each time a dolphin surfaces to breathe. One dolphin will rake its teeth across another's dorsal fin creating these nicks and bite marks on the falcate side of each dorsal fin. The marks are permanent when skin is removed and are unique to each dolphin and seldom does the study team find markings that are identical, one dolphin to another.

Photos of every dolphin dorsal fin on every excursion are documented and transferred to our database for historical purposes. Markings will change over time so dated photos and constant updating of files and database are required to maintain accuracy of the monitored local population.

NAMES: Names are given to each and every resident dolphin. They are unique to the 10,000 Island Dolphin Research Project and are the property of the program. In addition to our resident population the team has compiled photos of more than 200 transient dolphin that pass thru our study area. The names are an easy way to distinguish one subject from another.

COOPERATIVES: The team worked with, and assisted Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) as well as NOAA to rescue and/or identify dolphins in need of assistance and to provide identity and historical data of deceased or injured subjects.

ENCLOSED IS A SUMMARY ACTIVITY REGARDING OUR DOLPHIN POPULATION DURING THE FOURTH QUARTER OF THE YEAR WITH AN INCLUSION OF HISTORICAL DATA DATING BACK TO 2006.

2026 THIRD QUARTER REPORT

CALVES: The primary birthing season in our habitat is September, October and November, although newborn calves might be seen anytime of the year. More than 90% of births occur during the 3 month period mentioned here. From August 21st thru December 31st our study team documented 10 new calf sightings. Several of these births were expected, but some females high on our list to birth a new calf did not do so. Resident females Phineas, Sintas, Chip, Robin, Zipper all gave birth. First time mom Honeymoon surprised the team with a new calf as well. The other 4 newborn were from moms that live offshore or in south Marco Island. They are OG2, Bert, Salt and Crimp. Since it is safer to raise a calf in shallow water immediately after birth, some transient moms bring their babies to the sandbars to teach them to breathe and swim, without the worry of large predators attacking the newborn.

Our dolphins have a gestation period of about 12 months and calves in our habitat typically stay by a mom's side for 3 to 5 years.

From 2018-2025 the study team has documented 73 new calves born with 64 surviving for a success rate of 86+%.

SUB ADULTS: Young dolphins that leave the care of a mom are no longer referred to as calves but are not "sub adults" since they will not physically and sexually mature until ages of 7 to 14. Females in our study area tend to mature at about 7 to 10 years of age, while males will mature 5 to 7 years later in life. The youngest a female has given birth is 8 years old.

Some sub adults will form small groups oof 3 to 6 individuals, likely the result of companionships formed earlier in life, to socialize and feed together. Several more calves joined this category in 2025 as Sintas and Chip gave birth to new calves.

The health and well-being of the sub adult population in general is excellent. Foraging does not appear to be an issue as the moms are excellent teachers and these young do very well when on their own. We quite often experience family reunions since the sub adults will return to feed where mom taught them to feed.

ADULT FEMALES: Adult females in our study area total 42, outnumbering adult males almost 3 to1 (15 adult males). Once they begin producing calves, they tend to birth another calf every 3 to 5 years. There are exceptions when a mom loses a calf to predation. We have 5 females in our society that have lost a calf within 2 months of birthing. In all 5 cases, within 2 months, these moms have become pregnant again and, with a 12 month gestation period, will have a new calf within 14 months of losing its previous calf. All 5 of these moms have all had at least 1 surviving calf prior to an incident such as this.

The study team had a list of females that should have given birth in 2025 and did not. We find that many of our females will seek the dominant males when they want to become pregnant. However, one of our most dominant males, Hatchet, has not been seen since September 2, 2024. If some of our females could not locate him for mating purposes in 2024, they may have skipped a year and did not give birth in 2025.

Of the 10 calves documented as new births in 2025, 9 have survived. Mom Phineas' calf was only seen for a few weeks, then not seen again. Phineas had the same result with her first born as well. Neither of her offspring survived, even though Phineas is the product of a very successful mom.

ADULT MALES: Of the 15 adult males in our study, 6 have dominated the mating in our area. Males will sometimes form a relationship with another male, known as a “male pair bond”. Those 6 dominant males were 3 pairs in the past.

However, changes are taking place among that group. Males Bangle and Finch are now the dominant pair. Males Hatchet and Capri were the most dominant but, as mentioned above, Hatchet has not been seen since September of 2024. Capri has been seen with several different males but not formed an alliance or bond as he did with Hatchet. Capri and Hatchet were together for 20 years or more. Males Captain Jack and Trixie were also 2 of the top 6 but sightings of Captain Jack are now very few and he appears to be very old. Trixie has been seen by himself quite often but periodically will be seen with Captain Jack.

Several of our young, mature males are forming alliances and the potential for several new pair bonds seem obvious. Males Jayson and Kona have paired, as well as Kali and Fuller, Notch and Sinbad, and Simon and Eli. These new pairs are potentials to become the dominant males in the near future.

The original 6 dominant males are all in their upper 30’s, or as old as 60 year of age. Some of the younger pair bonds are stronger than the original 6 in our study and there will like be a change in the hierarchy in the near future.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: There have been no significant weather events during 2025 to affect our dolphins. No algal blooms or other bacteria related outbreaks have been noted in the Marco Island area. There were no hurricanes or tropical storms that would cause a change in behavior by our dolphins.

Dolphins in our habitat are an “indicator species”. If they are here, feeding and playing that is a great sign that everything else in our ecosystem is doing well.

Our team has had no need to call FWC or NOAA for injury, rescue or death events over the past year.

2025 SUMMARY

Social activity, feeding habits and overall well-being of our dolphin population has been very normal in all age groups. All 10 of our calves born in 2024 have survived and 9 0f 10 of our 2025 newborn have also survived.

The number of documented sightings has increased slightly year over year for the past 5 years.

In addition, there have been more and more transient, or unidentified, dolphins in our survey area.

There has been no significant injuries either by boat strike or by predators in the 2025 year.

Changes in dorsal fin markings will continue as our dolphins socialize and all changes will be noted daily so as not to lose track or mistake any subjects in our program.

Because of our shallow habitat, predation by sharks was nonexistent in 2025. The sharks of our river, bays and estuaries are here. Most of our adult dolphins are larger than the sharks that travel our study area.

REPORT: This report was compiled by the 10,000 Island Dolphin Research Project's team members which include a PhD Environmental Scientist, a Marine Biologist and 3 Florida Master Naturalists, certified by the University of Florida. This report is presented to you by Lead Naturalist / Florida Master Naturalist Bob McConville.

You may contact Bob at 239-642-6899 or by email at: dolphinsofmarco@gmail.com.

Bob and the team welcome all inquiries regarding our program and look forward to other institutions sharing their data and thoughts with our team.

Thank you for your time to read our report. We hope it generates some thoughts about the importance of sharing data worldwide!

OUR MOTTO: PASSION, INTEGRITY, EDUCATION!

Bob McConville, Lead Naturalist