April 12, 2026

10,000 ISLAND DOLPHIN RESEARCH PROJECT

MARCO ISLAND, FLORIDA

2026 SECOND QUARTER REPORT

APRIL 1 THRU JUNE 30

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 inhabiting the north Marco Island Florida waters and surrounding vicinity. The study has a database of documented sightings dating back to February 8, 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 April 1 thru June 30, 2026.

During this 3 month period the team experienced 110 excursions with a total of 1,873 documented sightings of more than 130 identified local dolphins for an average of 17 dolphins per excursion. For the first 6 months of 2026 there were 4,055 identified sightings on 250 total excursions for an average of 16 documented sightings per trip.

For the entire year of 2025 the team took 407 excursions and documented 6,468 identified sightings for an average, also, of 16 dolphins per excursion. This total number of verified sightings has increased since 2024 when the average for that year was 11 dolphins per outing. This is due primarily to the 23 new calves documented in the Fall of 2024 and Fall of 2025. Our dolphins are local and taught to feed in the areas close to their birth sites.

Ecosystem: The 10,000 islands and Rookery Bay are primarily a red mangrove forest with shallow water surroundings. Even at the entrance to the Gulf waters the habitat is still shallow but, in general, much clearer waters since the mangroves are not there.

Before human development in our study area, dolphins fed at the base of the mangroves, on the sandbars and in the mud flats. The introduction of civilization produced additional foraging opportunities with docks, seawalls and canals. With the abundance of food in the habitat the dolphin population here does not migrate any great distances, but some do have an extensive travel range. These are residential, coastal species of bottlenose ranging in age from newborn to adults in their 60's and 70's. This local population will consume approximately 1 ton of fish per day.

FEEDING: Many of our subjects feed individually here. They do not require a pod structure as witnessed in offshore dolphin societies since the waters are so shallow here. On

occasion, small groups will band together and herd fish to the sandbars or shorelines for an easier catch. Strand feeding has been observed periodically along particular mudflats.

IDENTIFICATION: Our dolphins are identified using on board photography of the nips, nicks and indents of the dorsal fins, as this fin is seen each time a dolphin surfaces to breathe. A dolphin will rake its teeth across another's dorsal fin creating these markings and bite marks on the falcate curve of that fin. The marks are permanent and unique to each individual.

Photos on the camera SD cards are hand documented on our in real time at the time of the sighting, then 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 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 more than 200 photos of transient dolphins that pass thru the survey area on occasion but are not here long enough to be considered residents. Names act as an easy way to identify one subject from another.

COOPERATIVES: The team has worked with, and assisted, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) as well as NOAA to rescue and/or identify dolphins in need of assistance and to provide identification and historical data of injured or deceased subjects. The team has been instrumental in four life saving events regarding a resident dolphin.

ENCLOSED IS A SUMMARY OF ACTIVITY REGARDING OUR DOLPHIN POPULATION DURING THE FIRST QUARTER OF 2026 WITH AN INCLUSION OF HISTORICAL DATA DATING BACK TO 2006.

2026 FIRST QUARTER REPORT

CALVES: The primary birthing season in our habitat is September, October and November, although newborn calves might be seen at anytime during the year. In the Fall of 2025 our team documented 10 new calf sightings with 9 surviving. Of the newborn, 6 belonged to our resident females and 4 were with moms that live offshore or in the south Marco Island area. It appears very typical the transient females will often raise their young on the sandbars where water is shallow, and fish are an easy catch for mom. Several females on our list as expectant mothers did not give birth. Our "Wish List" for the Fall of 2026 now has 16 potential females named as possible to give birth.

Our females have a gestation period of about 12 months and calves here typically stay by a mother's side for 3 to 5 years.

From 2018 thru 2025 the study team has documented 73 new births 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 yet adults. They are classified as "Sub Adults" until they are physically and sexually mature. Females in our study area tend to mature at 7 years of age or older. Males here tend to mature 5 to 7 years later than the females. The youngest a female has given birth in our survey area is 8 years old.

Some sub adults will form small groups of 3 to 6 individuals, likely the result of companionships formed earlier in life. They will feed, play and travel together but not on a full time basis. 2 more calves became sub adults last Fall when moms Sintas and Chip gave birth. Their 3 year olds are now on their own and classified as sub adults.

The overall health and well-being of the sub adult population in general is excellent. Foraging does not appear to be an issue as the seasoned moms are excellent teachers and these young do very well on their own. We quite often experience family reunions since the sub adults will feed where they grew up. For example, adult female Rakes taught her offspring to feed on a particular sandbar and it is not unusual to see her, her 10 year old, 13 year old and 4 year old feeding together.

ADULT FEMALES: Our dolphin society consists of 42 adult females and 15 adult males. Our females tend to produce a new offspring every 3 to 5 years. There are exceptions when a mom loses a calf to predation. We have 6 moms that have lost a calf within 2 months of birthing. In 5 of these 6 cases, within 2 months, the females 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 females have had at least 1 surviving calf to an incident such as this.

Most of our calves leave a mother's care within 3 to 5 years, mostly when that female gives birth to a new calf. There has been 1 exception. Adult female Jing Jing gave birth to Kiwan in the Fall of 2024. Her 3 year old, C J, did not leave her side. In fact, Kiwan is now approaching 2 years old and C J, turning 4 this Fall, is still with mom. This is a strong indication to our team that C J is likely a female.

First time mother Robin caught our special attention when her 5 month old calf Ace became entangled with fishing line wrapped around its right fluke. We regularly sent photos of the injury plus GPS coordinates to Florida Wildlife Commission (FWC) for several weeks. FWC eventually arrived in an attempt to free the calf of the entanglement but were unsuccessful. Fortunately, the line released from the calf's fluke causing minor damage. We are happy to report that Ace is doing fine, now approaching its first birthday.

Our list of females who are potentials to give birth in the Fall of 2026 is 16, larger than usual. Several females skipped a year from their normal cycle of having a new calf every 3 years in 2025. One of our dominant males, Hatchet, has not been seen since September of 2024 and he is thought to be the primary mate of several of our females. Our team looks forward to documenting what this Fall will produce.

The females that are potentials to give birth are: Avery, Batman, Nibbles, Rakes, Kaya, MT2, Salsa, Coco, Phineas, Destiny, Cosmo, Skipper, Sparky, Orange, Patch's Twin and Payton.

With only 20 years of survey work completed in our area, we note that, if Avery has a new calf, it will be her 8th and the first mom in our study to produce that many offspring. Kaya and Skipper are sisters and, should both of them give birth, this will be the first time 2 sisters have given birth in the same year.

ADULT MALES: Of the 15 adult resident males in our society 6 have proven to be the Alpha males over the past 20 years. Males will sometimes, but not always, form a relationship with each other, known as a "Male Pair Bond" and these 3 pairs are likely responsible for most of the calves born here over the years.

Changes are taking place as we speak as some of these bonded males are now reaching 50 to 60 years old and a crop of young, more viral, males are stepping up to challenge them. Hatchet, paired with Capri, has not been seen for more than 1 ½ years and Capri has been keeping company with several males but not reformed an alliance with any of them.

Several of our young adult males are forging alliances and the potential for new pair bonds seems obvious. Males Jayson and Kona have paired, as well as Kali and Fuller, Notch and Sinbad, and Simon and Eli. Eli was a regular sighting with Simon for several months but has not been seen for nearly 5 months. Simon has been accompanied by Capri recently. These new pairs are potentials to become the dominant males in the near future.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: There have been no significant weather events here. No algal blooms, bacteria related out breaks or industrial spills have been sited around Marco Island. Hurricane season begins soon and we'll see how that affects our dolphins.

Dolphins in our habitat are an "Indicator Species". If they are surviving normally that is a great sign that every other level of our aquatic ecosystem is functioning normally. Our team made only 1 call this past quarter to FWC to report a fishing line entangled around a 5 month old calf's fluke. That event corrected itself and that calf is doing fine. A 6 year old male, Ariel, stranded himself at low tide recently but was safely ushered by the public to deeper water before we could arrive to assess the situation. There has not been any deaths of our local population to report.

2026 SECOND QUARTER SUMMARY:

Social activity, feeding habits and overall well-being of our dolphin population has been normal in all age groups. The 9 surviving calves born in 2025 are all now 6-7 months old and doing well.

Due to a strong survival rate of our newborn, the number of documented sightings has increased from 2 years ago, especially the last 5 years.

There tends to be an increase in transient dolphins traveling thru our survey area.

Changes in dorsal fin markings, the key to our identification process, will continue as our dolphin socialize and all changes will be noted on a daily basis so as not to lose track of any individual or mistake any of the subjects in our program.

There has been no significant injuries either by boat strike or predators this quarter.

Because of the shallow habitat here, predation by sharks was nonexistent this quarter. Sharks are prevalent here in our rivers, bays and estuaries but most of our adult dolphins are larger than the sharks that travel our study area.

We do experience larger sharks, primarily hammerheads and bullsharks, in our area around April and May. This is when these large moms come to the shallows to have their pups. Again, there was no loss of dolphin life at this time.

Since some of our population travel the area beaches to feed, we do know that several large sharks are near shore during turtle nesting season as well.

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

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We welcome all inquiries and thank you for your interest in our survey work!

OUR MOTTO: PASSION, INTEGRITY, EDUCATION!