

## Identifying Individuals

Identifying individuals allows researchers to assess population size, structure and movements. This information is vital for management. It also allows for the monitoring of populations and their behaviour over time. Any distinctive features can be used for identification, but the most common are shape and location of marks on the dorsal fin. The shape of the fin or skin pigmentation may also be used for identification.

## Whale Watching Regulations

The Wildlife (Whale) Regulations 1998 state that you must not deliberately approach whales and dolphins within the prescribed distances, which are:

- 100m for recreational vessels and personal watercraft
- 30m for swimmers, divers and surfers
- 50m for tour operators with DSE permits. Other boats must remain 100m away from tour boats interacting with dolphins.
- 150m for commercial vessels

Note that the only licensed tours operate in southern Port Phillip Bay.

Penalties apply for breaches of these regulations. However it is not an offence if they approach your boat. In fact it is valuable to record this and what they subsequently do...such as diving under the vessel, scraping themselves, bow-riding, or breaching.

It is illegal under any circumstances, whether from land or boat, to touch or feed dolphins.

In cases of obvious pollution, please contact the EPA Pollution Watch on (03) 9696 2777. If you happen to find stranded dolphins or seals, alive or dead, notify either the Dolphin Research Institute, DSE call centre on 136 186, or your local council. You can also report cases of harassment to the DSE Call Centre.



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*Please contact us if you would like to support the Dolphin Research Institute and receive more information about our work locally and nationally.*



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## Gippsland Lakes Community Dolphin Watch



**1300 130 949**

## Background

The Dolphin Research Institute is a non-profit community organisation which has been working to protect Victoria's dolphins since the early 1990's. The Institute is concerned with the impacts of tourism and broader environmental issues and is an active supporter of marine protected areas. In addition to building a credible database on dolphin numbers, behaviours and movements, the Institute's research has provided the basis for drafting new laws and a licensing system for tour operators.

The Dolphin Research Institute's professional full time staff conducts a year-round research program, which is complemented with the analysis of data provided by community sightings throughout all Victorian waters.

Understanding dolphin behaviour and being able to identify both individual and group movement is an excellent way of monitoring the health of the marine environment.

Whilst Community Dolphin Watch provides the means for gathering a large and varied amount of data, it also encourages communities to develop an appreciation for the marine environment.

Very little is formally known about the dolphins that utilise the Gippsland Lakes. There are many questions requiring investigation such as:

- "Is there a resident population?"
- "If not are they the same ones which return each year?"
- "What is the structure and interaction of the populations?"
- "Do they prefer different parts of the Lakes?"

Sighting information from the community is a starting point for learning more about the Lakes dolphins.



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## Recording Sightings

Sightings consist of noting the date, time, location, number of dolphins, and behaviours. The aim is to observe in whatever way you can and to pool your observations for analysis. The more detail recorded the better. Even not seeing dolphins is valuable data.

Gippsland Lakes Community Dolphin Watch utilises a laminated grid reference map, a chart of behaviours, and a tear off recording slip for forwarding to the Dolphin Research Institute.

All sightings are entered into a database which already contains thousands of sightings. The information is confidential and site specific results are not released to the public. The Institute prefers to summarise the results and inform the community via newsletters.

## Counting Dolphins

It can be very tricky to count how many dolphins are present in a group, especially when they are feeding or socialising. It is easiest when they are travelling because you can count each as they surface. Researchers have found it best to estimate the minimum and maximum number present and to note calves (in brackets) included in that number eg 25-30(3). It can take some time observing the dolphins to arrive at your best estimate.

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## Defining Behaviour

The Institute uses 5 main behavioural categories:

**Travelling** – regular dive and surfacing pattern whilst heading in one direction.

**Feeding** – may be surface feeding where they move rapidly, change direction often and fish may be seen skittering across the surface. When feeding on something deeper, their dives will be longer. May herd fish into shallow water, under jetties or up onto beaches.

**Social** – lots of body contact between individuals, leaping, chasing each other.

**Milling** – very low activity, may not be going in any particular direction, sometimes stemming the tide.

**Human interaction** – any form of interaction with humans and/or vessels, including bowriding or surfing in the wake of vessels

Behaviours may overlap or be combined, eg travel/feed, social/feed. These categories have intentionally been kept broad because it can sometimes be difficult to be more specific. Describe what you see and that will always be worth recording.

In addition, you may be able to identify specific actions such as:

**breaching/leaping**...coming out of the water and re-entering head first or belly/back flopping

**sharking**...moving at high speed with only the tip of the dorsal fin visible, often making tight turns

**surfacing**...high or low depending on how much of the body comes out of the water and if the belly clears the surface

**spyhopping**...rising out of the water vertically so the head is above the surface

Other specialised movements might include tail slapping, shaking a head, doing head stands in shallow water, herding fish onto beach...and more.



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