

On The Social Interactions Of Bottlenose Dolphins In Maternal Bands



Me and Marty were just about wrapping up the day's log on the social interactions of bottlenose dolphins in maternal bands is how we happened to be out on the water at the time. Out of nowhere, one of the bottlenoses plumb took off out into deep waters. Like it remembered it left the oven on or something, it plumb took off out of the feeding ring, which if you know anything about maternal bands of bottlenose dolphins is out of the question. Dolphins aren't so much a march-to-the-beat-of-your-own-drummer type of cetacean. Certainly not come feeding time. But sure enough, the rest of the bottlenoses about-faced and followed the one on out into deep waters, leaving untouched a whole school of mackerel they already went through the trouble of tracking and encircling. Not to mention leaving us scratching our heads, me and Marty.

I said to him, "Criminy, Mar! I never knew old *tursiops truncatus* to be a picky eater."

And Marty says to me, "Rosie, my girl, you can say that again. Why don't we see what all the fuss is about."

So Marty grabbed the tiller and gave her juice to spare. Mind you, a mature bottlenose can cut loose at 30, 35 clicks-per, and we were just puttering around that day in the institute's powerboat, not much to give chase in, on account that me and Marty been assisting research on this particular band of bottlenoses coming up on three months now and they never so much as left the cove during feeding. So Marty leaned on the tiller, gives her all the juice, and I have my eyes underwater to monitor all the fancy tracking equipment. When we shoved off at dawn, there was a layer of fog scooting right across the water, business as usual per Southern California. Burns off usually by mid-to-late morning, which right now it was. So Marty cut us loose into open ocean, and the early morning fog was yielding to one of the most spectacular rainbows I'd ever seen.

"Holy Roy G. Biv, Mar!" I said, 'cause you could actually count the colors all streaked across

the sky like they been Sharpied on there permanent. And I swear to God, stick a needle in my eye, the bottlenoses were heading straight for the spot where the rainbow met the water. Old *tursiops truncatus* enjoys a highly acute sense of vision, let me tell you, but they can't see diddly in the way of color. In my two years assisting research on the social interactions of bottlenose dolphins in maternal bands, plus the eight years I spent in the U.S. Coastguard, I never seen such a thing. I seen that sonofabitch Reagan sell our coastline to the oil rigs, that's for sure. I seen the beaches go black from oil spill, the pelicans flightless and sticking to the pier like melted chocolate. But I never gave chase to a pack of dolphins gliding toward a rainbow. Marty neither.

So when the dolphins get there, right where the rainbow seemed to plunge into the water, they went back into their little feeding ring like "Ring Around the Rainbow."

And Marty says, "Well, there you go, Rosie. Like I always say: a mackerel in the fin is worth two in the pelagic zone." And I'm thinking this better be some ethereal mackerel, way these dolphins are behaving, way this rainbow is gushing down from the sky like there's a tap hid somewhere up in the cumuli. So we get a little closer and see the bottlenoses freeze up in their feeding stages. They were circling but not diving for fish, and that's when I saw the girl in the middle of the ring, where the rainbow would be if we weren't so close. Her hair fanned out across the water, all dark like oil slick. Her mouth was open and bobbing at the waterline. She curled a few fingers in a little wave. Such a wave as like she was embarrassed to run into you at the supermarket.

"Criminy," I said.

Marty eased off and pattered us in. The dolphins parted their ring to make way—almost politely you could call it—they parted into a semi-circle. I threw the girl a line, but it slipped out of her hands when I tried to pull her in. Marty inched us closer til I could lay hands on the girl, and when I hoisted her out of the water, the dolphins seemed to watch. Hell, I couldn't blame them. Myself, I half expected the girl to be sporting a fin and wearing a bivalve brassiere. I laid her across the deck in a wet pile. She was not shivering, a bad sign. I started pulling off wet clothes and Marty radioed it in. Could hardly believe my ears when he gave the coordinates out over the radio. Five clicks offshore, about eight clicks from the mackerel in the cove. God knows how the girl drifted out that far without drowning. In a Ziploc baggie clipped to her sleeve was a suicide note, or so I assumed on account of I couldn't read it. Not a word of the English nor broken Spanish got through to her. All I could do was wrap her up like a baby in Marty's old Coastguard jacket and hold her close to get some warmth back into her. Her color resembled a dolphin's. She couldn't have been a day over seventeen.

Marty swung the tiller shoreward and gave her juice, and the farther we got, the bigger the rainbow got. The fog was long gone now, and I shook the girl awake and made her look before the colors disappeared. "Look at the rainbow and the dolphins," I said. "See 'em fan out in their band and swim across the horizon. See 'em cresting." They crested over and over. I squinched water out of the girl's hair and splayed it across my arm to dry. Marty accelerated and the breeze carried tidal fragrance. Whitecaps across the ocean twinkled like a million quarters flipping. The dolphins kept cresting and the whitecaps kept twinkling, all as if to say, "The sea

holds more mysteries than you and Marty and all the fancy underwater tracking equipment in the world could ever fathom.” The girl hurled about a gallon and a half of seawater into my lap and I just held her hair, and even though she couldn’t have understood, I talked to her about dolphins.

Eight clicks, how far she was, is beyond the limits of recorded communications between bottlenoses in the same band. How could a dolphin sense human distress calls that far away? Did they know we would follow? “The world is a strange and beautiful place,” I told her and patted her hair. Her skin was sleek from the saltwater. It was like holding a baby dolphin in my lap. She was a beautiful girl and lucky to be alive and was still wearing Marty’s jacket when we got to shore and they loaded her into the ambulance. They took her to UCLA hospital, the one which bears that sonofabitch Reagan’s name, wouldn’t you know. The sonofabitch who tried to sell the sea that saved the girl.

All me and Marty did, rest of that morning, was sit around in a nameless cafe by the marina. We sipped coffee and stared at each other because what could we say? Marty got a scone which he broke in half, then broke the halves into halves, then broke the halves of the halves into halves. It was two whole days before we got up the nerve to tell the professor. We were unsure how she would react is why we waited. Certain fundamental parameters for the research had been undermined. Me and Marty weren’t even authorized to leave the cove that day, gas prices being what they are. But then the papers got wind, and we had no choice but to tell.

The story ran on the second page with a picture of the girl. She was from Lithuania. Beat the hell out of me how she ended up floating out to sea off of Marina del Rey. She stayed overnight in the hospital and was released the next day with a clean bill of health. I cried when I read the story and clipped the photo. I wanted to find the girl, but that was silly. Even if I tracked her down, what could I say? I didn’t even speak the language.

The professor, as it turned out, wasn’t upset at all. Fact is, it didn’t even change her theories one bit on the social interactions of bottlenose dolphins in maternal bands. Anecdotal evidence only gets you so far. Me and Marty could have gotten our names in the *Times*. They called for a statement, but what could I say? Eight clicks is beyond the limits of recorded communications. If I tracked the girl down, what could I say? “What a strange and beautiful place is this world?” She was only sixteen, and I held her hair. Two days later the girl made the *Times* again. It was the cover this time. She used pills and was successful.

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