

How are the mermaids in Singapore doing?



Irrawaddy dolphins



Humpback dolphin



Dugong



Bottlenose dolphins

Mermaids were numerous centuries ago. They unfortunately disappeared and left only a few sirenians called dugongs or sea cows as their representatives in our warm tropical waters. These peaceful marine mammals are not the only inhabitants of the Singapore waters: YOU, especially as a sea lover, as a diver, may encounter dolphins from four different species.

Amazing? Unbelievable?

Trust me and maybe next time you go diving, you will meet one of these elusive marine mammals.

Such an encounter is an award you generally earn after several hours of patience, staring continuously at the sea.

Or, sometimes, you lucky folks have the chance to be at the right place, at the right time: I cannot believe it!

Whichever is the case, both kinds of sighting reports are of great interest to me. The more information you get and the more we can do for our dolphins and dugongs. Would you like to see more of them while at sea? Would you enjoy a swim with those guys? Would the sight of a peacefully grazing dugong delight you? OH! OH! OH! I guess you understand me....

Friends of the marine environment among you could have the opportunity to give me a hand spotting marine mammals. I have prepared a sighting form you can get directly from me (see my address below), or from your Club. Remember you are my eyes while at sea!

So, you should look for the number of animals, their species, the presence of calves, their activity, their location... Try to collect as much information as possible.

Are you thinking "Not easy?"...!? Don't worry, I know how hard it can be: getting blind just to guess the exact number of dolphins surfing the waves!

This is the reason why I will give you some clues to at least make your work a little easier.

First of all, you may encounter four main dolphin species plus the dugong - the only sirenian species in our waters.

The dugong looks very different from a dolphin: the body shape is not as torpedo shaped... as soon as you see a dugong picture, you will never make a mistake again concerning its identification in the field. A big gray-brown animal with 2 nostrils and a bulbous face: that is our modern mermaid moving quietly in shallow waters!

Well, things are growing in difficulty for the next steps: how to differentiate between humpback dolphins, Irrawaddy dolphins, Bottlenose dolphins and Finless porpoises?

Keep in mind three important criteria: the color, the beak and the dorsal fin. One of those three parameters will always help you to solve the problem.

The Bottlenose dolphin is dark gray in color with well visible beak and dorsal fin.

The Humpback dolphin is white to pink so you may not be mistaken with the Bottlenose. His beak is also slender, but well... While at sea I agree the difference may not be easy to make!

Moreover, the Humpback dolphin should have a hump on its back! This is not always very visible and is different from one individual to the next. Moreover, in Singapore, Humpback dolphins may be with no hump at all, ...Sorry!

Let's go straight to the Finless porpoise: of course, this one has no dorsal fin! It is also the smallest and has a blunt rounded head without beak.

The last one, the Irrawaddy dolphin is dark gray in color like all of the other species, except the Humpback dolphin. He has no beak and a very small dorsal fin.

All right. Now, try to imagine yourself on a boat observing a pod of dolphins and trying to figure out what kind they are: just ask yourself the right questions!!

"-Do they have a beak?"

Yes. O.K. two species match the case: the Bottlenose dolphin and the Humpback dolphin.

No, so they could be Finless porpoises or Irrawaddy dolphins. Then check the dorsal fin.

"-Do these individuals have a dorsal fin?"

If yes, there are still 3 choices (Irrawaddy, Humpback & Bottlenose dolphins).

If not, you have the answer: they are Finless porpoises!

"-Are they dark gray in color or white ivory?"

So, now I'd say:

A beak, a dorsal fin, dark gray in color, you've got a Bottlenose dolphin...

A beak, a dorsal fin, white ivory in color, this one is a Humpback dolphin...

No beak, a dorsal fin, dark gray in color, you know it is an Irrawaddy dolphin...

No beak, no dorsal fin, dark gray in color, this guy is a Finless porpoise.

Isn't it simple? OK, to be frank, it is a little harder than that, but I bet you will get used to it after a while.

Anyway, every bit of information related to marine mammals will help SWIMMS (Singapore Wild Marine Mammal Survey). The location will tell me where to look for dolphins. The identification of species is of great importance if you can provide it. The number of individuals, the presence of calves etc will lead me to a better understanding of the cetacean group size and group composition in Singapore waters. A video footage could also be a very useful tool.

In the future, the SWIMMS research project will focus on the abundance, thanks to your help and the numerous sighting reports. A photo identification program will be carried out too in order to know individual dolphins in our waters.

Our main goal for the Singaporean marine mammal populations is to assess their health and to maintain their numbers in our waters.

Do you like the idea? Go ahead and get our sighting forms ...

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Note: Sighting forms are available at the Changi Sailing Club office.