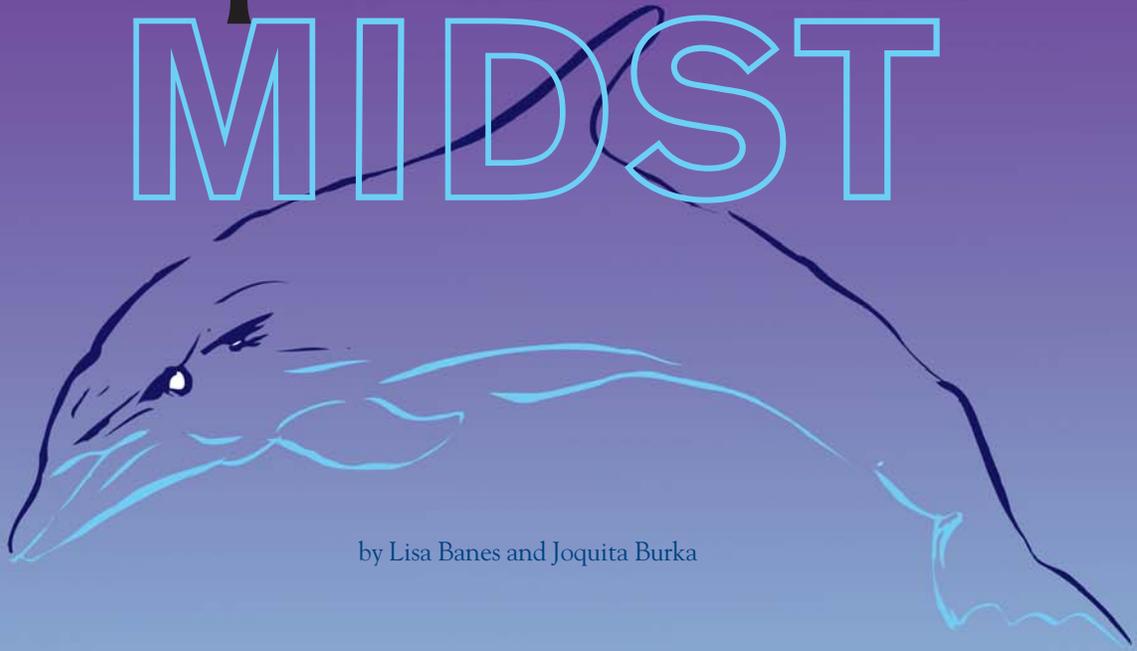


Dolphins In Our MIDST



by Lisa Banes and Joquita Burka

We grew to love the little gray bottlenose that seemed to wave and talk in *Flipper*. We're fascinated by their grace and trusting nature. And nothing can quiet a crowded beach and turn our gazes seaward like the cry of "dolphins."

Dolphins have long been one of the most interesting sea creatures to those of us bound to the land by our lack of flippers. We long to get up close and personal with these gentle mammals. Fortunately, the South Carolina coastal waters teem with dolphins and offer a chance to study these creatures in their own beautiful habitats.

Generally, dolphins are very accepting of and accommodating to the humans with whom they coexist. Dolphins regularly approach boats and swimmers, flirting, playing and "talking" like old friends. Unfortunately this very trusting acceptance of man has in many ways threatened them and their habitat. Today, dolphins are protected by the

Marine Mammal Protection Act and most South Carolina marine services stress the importance of careful observation.

"Our excursions are interactive and informative so that passengers can learn about dolphins, how large they grow and how often they need to breathe," says a staffer at PauHana and Flying Circus Charters, a coastal catamaran chartering service. "When you go out, you never know when or where you'll see dolphins or what mood they'll be in. All the dolphins here are in the wild, so we make it clear to passengers that it is illegal to feed them or to harass, chase or pursue them in any way. You have to let the dolphins take the lead."

So how do you get acquainted with the beautiful, mysterious creatures who inhabit our state's tidal creeks, rivers and marshes? As luck would have it, your options are plentiful in South Carolina. Whether you prefer a guided group tour, an intimate moonlight cruise, a quiet kayaking trip or a relaxing day under sail, you and the dolphins (not to mention pelicans, egrets, osprey, herons and other shorelife) can have a safe, peaceful visit. Simply choose your craft. Pick a knowledgeable guide. And be patient. Watch and wait for the sight that will fill you with both delight and envy as these most docile sea mammals dip, dive, play and circle freely in the warm waters of South Carolina.

Want To Get Nose-To-Bottlenose With The Dolphins?



Here are just a few of the outfitters who can introduce you to our kindred spirits in the sea:

HILTON HEAD ISLAND

Broad Creek Marina Dolphin and nature cruises aboard covered tour boats. 843-681-2522, sonnyc2@juno.com.

Coastal Kayaking Guided dolphin and nature tours through Broad Creek. 843-842-4194.

Cool Breeze Kayaking Excursions from Pinckney Island Wildlife Refuge and Broad Creek. 843-683-4040, 877-286-5154, coolbreeze@hiltonheadisland.com.

Cool Stuff Tours Narrated land and sea tours in one-of-a-kind amphibious craft. 843-342-3000, www.coolstufftours.com.

Commander Zodiac The thrill of rafting plus marshland exploration. 843-671-3344.

H2O Sports Center Enviro tours on a USCG-certified Zodiac inflatable. 843-671-4FUN (4386).

Island Explorer Narrated tours on Calibogue Sound. 843-785-2100.

Kayak Hilton Head Observe dolphin and other marsh critters by kayak or double kayak. 843-684-1910.

Outside Hilton Head Ecotours via sea kayak in pristine salt marshes. 843-686-6996, www.outsidehiltonhead.com.

PauHana and Flying Circus Charters Sailing, dolphin-watch excursions and nature cruises aboard the 53-foot, 49-passenger PauHana or the 27-foot, six-passenger Flying Circus catamarans. 843-686-2582.

Southern Exposures Kayak Adventures Observe marine wildlife in tidal creeks, led by interpretive naturalists. 843-683-6900.

KIAWAH/SEABROOK ISLANDS

Bohicket Marina Wildlife watching from 25-foot Privateer custom tour boats or 45-foot excursion boat. 843-768-7294, www.bohicketboat.com.

A Fish Out Of Water?

You might be surprised to learn that dolphins are NOT fish. The game fish called dolphin, or mahi mahi, is a completely different species. Like humans, dolphins are mammals who breathe air, have a developed memory and can follow even complex instructions. And like humans, they have the capacity to learn and to love. The familiar bottlenose dolphin (like TV's *Flipper*) is known for its intelligence, gentleness and curiosity, as well as for the complex sonar communication systems and social structures within each school.