

OVERWINTERING OF COASTAL BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS (*TURSIOPS TRUNCATUS*) IN VIRGINIA

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Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) are usually seen in the nearshore waters of Virginia from April through November. Historically, as water temperatures begin to drop, the coastal migratory dolphins leave Virginia waters and apparently travel to areas south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Although sightings occasionally occur outside of this time period, individual dolphins have not previously been observed overwintering in Virginia. During the winter of 1996-97, we documented a lone dolphin in Broad Bay, a shallow-water bay connected to Chesapeake Bay in Virginia Beach. This may have been the first recorded incidence of a bottlenose dolphin overwintering in Virginia. Staff and volunteers from the VMSM Stranding Center continued to regularly observe the dolphin and recorded its condition and behavior. The dolphin remained in Broad Bay and was sighted with a neonate calf in July of 1997. During the fall of 1997, the mother and calf were joined by five additional dolphins. We have continued to monitor this group of seven dolphins through the winter of 1997-98 using boat and shore-based observations along with public phone-in reports. Environmental conditions (salinity, tide movements, and water and air temperatures) and the photo identification, number and condition of the dolphins has been continually observed and recorded. As of March 1998, the dolphins are all seemingly healthy and will apparently successfully overwinter in Virginia waters. Whether these events represent a northward extension of the traditional winter range of the coastal bottlenose dolphins or are simply short-term phenomena involving a few isolated individuals remains to be seen.