

Hawaiian Spinner Dolphin

Q: Why do spinner dolphins leap and spin?

Scientists aren't certain why spinner dolphins leap and spin and most other types of dolphins do not, but there are several ideas. One is that they are trying to remove remoras, a kind of suckerfish that attach themselves to the dolphins' bodies. Another possibility is that this could be a form of communication for the dolphins.

Q: What time of the day do spinner dolphins rest and tend to their young?

Spinner dolphins rest from sunrise until late afternoon. This is also when mothers will interact with their young.

Q: How do spinner dolphins behave when they are resting?

While resting, the dolphins slowly swim back and forth, either along the coast or in deeper water. This is called "milling". They do this for about four to five hours. During their period of rest the dolphins do not spin or leap very often. Although they are resting, they do not sleep in the same way that humans do. Half of the dolphin brain is alert to ensure they continue to breathe, while the other half of their brain is at rest. Many scientists also believe that dolphins keep half of their brain awake to be aware of predators.

Q: What do spinner dolphins eat?

Hawaiian spinner dolphins feed on small fish, shrimp and squid.

Q: What time of the day do they go out and search for food?

Spinner dolphins feed at night in groups. Their prey lives in the deep ocean during the day, but moves toward the surface and closer to shore at night. After feeding, spinner dolphins return to shallow coastal areas to rest.

Q: How often do spinner dolphins reproduce?

A spinner dolphin will give birth, or "calve", once every two to three years. Sexual maturity occurs at around 7 years of age and pregnancy lasts around 11 months. There is no known mating season for the Hawaiian spinner dolphin.

Q: Are spinner dolphins aggressive?

Although they are not usually considered to be aggressive, spinner dolphins are wild animals; all wild animals have the potential of being aggressive, especially when they feel threatened. Spinners have been observed charging potential predators. They also sometimes interact roughly with one another and are tactile animals that use their teeth to bite and scrape, or "rake", one another as a way of interacting with each other. These natural behaviors could be harmful to a human.

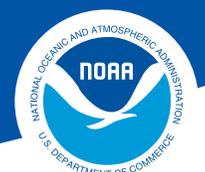
Q: Do spinner dolphins have predators?

Yes. Some types of sharks (e.g., tiger and white tip) that live in Hawaiian waters sometimes prey on spinner dolphins. In addition, killer whales, false killer whales, pygmy killer whales and short-finned pilot whales may also prey on spinners.



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Population

Q: How many spinner dolphins are there?

Scientists are not sure how many dolphins live in the Hawaiian Islands. The most recent estimate of the spinner dolphin population is 3,351 individuals. This number comes from a (2002) ship line-transect survey done within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands. This estimate is probably low because the ship could not get into shallow waters where spinner dolphins are found during much of the daytime. The most closely studied population of spinner dolphins is located around the Big Island of Hawaii. According to 1989-1992 photo-identification data, there are an estimated 2,334 individuals in this area.

Q: Is the spinner dolphin population declining?

Scientists do not have enough data at this time about population numbers to say whether or not the spinner dolphin population is declining. Evidence suggests there is a decline in the number of dolphins that use particular resting areas. Whether this means there is an actual decline in the population or the dolphins have moved to other locations to rest is unknown.



Spinner Dolphin Viewing

Q: Is swimming with resting spinner dolphins illegal?

Any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance that has the potential to change a marine mammal's behavior is considered to be harassment under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), and therefore, against the law. When people swim with resting wild spinner dolphins, the dolphins may be drawn out of their resting state to investigate swimmers. This may be a change in behavior which is considered harassment and is illegal.

Q: If a dolphin swims to me, is that considered harassment?

If you swim in the dolphin's habitat while they are resting, they may come out of that resting state to determine whether or not you are a predator. Your presence in their space has the potential to disrupt their normal behavior patterns, which may be considered harassment.

Q: Is it safe for me to swim with dolphins?

Because dolphins are wild animals, there is always a concern for human safety whenever people are in the water with them. Although dolphins have a reputation for being friendly, they are wild animals and should be treated with caution and respect. Human interactions with wild spinner dolphins can potentially cause long term negative effects to the animals, because if they are unable to get the rest they need during the day they may not have the energy they need to effectively hunt at night. Also, human interactions can disrupt mother spinner dolphins tending to their young or affect mating behavior which may possibly lead to a reduction in the size of the Hawaiian spinner dolphin population.