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The Pink Dolphins of Kalpitiya

Words & photography by Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne

Two navy Arrow boats screamed past us, our relative speeds exaggerated as we sped out in the opposite direction. We were headed to where the waters mix, on the trail of the Pink Dolphins of Kalpitiya. Local fishermen had told me that the *ongil* (Tamil for dolphin and porpoise) is seen regularly where the extensive Puttalam Lagoon enters the open sea.

Correctly known as the Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin, it is the only cetacean (the scientific order in which whales and dolphins are categorised) known to enter lagoons in Sri Lanka. The dugong is another marine mammal which enters lagoons, but it is a sirenian (a scientific order of animals with a distant affinity to elephants) and not a cetacean. Although the Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin is a little-studied dolphin about which very little was known until recently, for the fishermen of Kalpitiya it is no stranger.

The dolphins are not totally pink. But they show enough pink for me to label them as the 'Pink Dolphins of Kalpitiya'. However at the level of a species, the Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin, or *Sousa chinensis*, can become almost totally pink as they do in the waters around Hong Kong.

The sub-species found in Sri Lankan waters is *plumbea*, a reference to its plumbeous, or leaden or grey colour.

I had not even thought of going after the dolphins until I was told about them by Dr Charles Anderson, during dinner at the Alankuda Beach Resort. Dallas Martenstyn, who had played a pivotal role in drawing attention to the Spinner Dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) off Kalpitiya, had invited Charles. The pair had attempted to find the dolphins but were hampered by mechanical problems. During dinner, Charles drew my attention to a paper by Koen Cornelis Arthur Bröker, and Anouk Ilangakoon on the '*Occurrence and conservation needs of cetaceans in and around the Bar Reef Marine Sanctuary, Sri Lanka*' published in 2008 in the journal *Oryx* of Fauna & Flora International. Between April 2004 and March 2005, the authors had conducted monthly surveys of the Puttalam Lagoon. They had ten encounters with the humpback dolphins, three of them being in April.

The next morning, Charles, Dallas, and I set out to sea for a memorable encounter with 500-600 Spinner Dolphins. We had to go back south to join the first of two

back-to-back whale-watching groups which Charles was bringing to the Jetwing Lighthouse. They were coming to watch Blue Whales south of Mirrissa. The pink dolphins would have to wait.

Promising to resume the search, I was back a couple of weeks later, racing against the early onset of the Southwest Monsoon in April 2009. I had arrived ahead of Dallas and set out with Romlas – manager of the Alankuda Beach Resort – and Kumara, one of his boat crew.

I had warned Romlas and Kumara that we could not expect easy results. In 2001, when I set out to 'brand' Sri Lanka for leopard safaris, I did not encounter too many leopards on my first few game drives. Those that I did were not suitable for brochure-quality photography either. I had learnt that many field sessions are needed to find an animal and to learn enough about how to find it again. We asked passing fishing boats whether they had seen any dolphins. They all had, at some point during the last few weeks, but not today.

The next morning Dallas joined us and we headed out to one of the larger islands



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in the lagoon, Ippantivu. Nearly two hours had lapsed without a sighting when Nirman, the boatman, pointed ahead. It was immediately obvious that these dolphins were different to the oceanic Spinner Dolphins. What struck me at once was how much pink some of the individuals showed on their dorsal fin and body and even more on the tail flukes. On deep dives they would raise the tail out of the water. This feature, combined with their squat bodies, reminded me more of a Blue Whale than the graceful and aerodynamic oceanic dolphins.

They were relatively slower and showed a pronounced basal area under the dorsal fin, and were strongly 'humped' when diving. They did not show their beak for more than a fraction of a second and I found it impossible to photograph one. They were not afraid of fishing boats and at least two swam up to the boat and dived underneath. We followed them at a distance comfortable to them and kept pace in parallel whilst they traversed from one side of the lagoon to the other. We estimated that there were possibly ten or more. But it's never easy to estimate numbers of dolphins as only a few show up at any one time.

When we returned, Romlas, who saw my pictures, claimed he had seen at least four of these dolphins being sold as shark meat at the local fish market a week earlier. Clearly there is a need to create more awareness of how precious these dolphins are and the need to protect them.

The fishermen claimed that the pink dolphins are seen easily in the mornings when fishing boats are heading out to sea at first light. The next morning we on the boat in Puttalam Lagoon by 6 am. Three hours of searching yielded nothing. But Nirma, Maya, and Amali were able to see a part of Sri Lanka which many people cannot even imagine exists. That morning, I appreciated how large the area between the Kalpitiya Peninsula and the mainland really is. Blue Whales will betray their position with a spout which can be seen more than two kilometres away, but the Indo-Pacific Humpback does little to reveal its presence. Occasionally, one may breach, but in a choppy sea, this is easily missed.

The humpback dolphins are considered an in-shore species. They will enter lagoons, mangroves, estuaries, etc and also be at sea near the coastline. Dallas and I had

done three trips apiece, with a strike rate of one in three. Many more trips will be required before we gain a qualitative feel of what the strike rate is. For keen marine mammal enthusiasts, 'pinkies' add another marine mammal to the 'wants' list. It opens up more recreational possibilities for the Kalpitiya Peninsula, which has been earmarked for tourism development.

In a few more months, the Southwest Monsoon will be spent and the seas will be calm again. Others can resume the search for the little-studied pink dolphins of Kalpitiya. However, a word of caution is necessary. Marine mammal-watching must be handled responsibly with the welfare of the animals and client safety kept foremost. Prospective clients must understand that these animals need time to rest and sleep. If dolphin-watching is done properly, without stress to the animals, then marine mammal-watching can help conserve these animals. The local fishermen will understand that a live dolphin is worth a lot in tourist dollars. 🐬

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