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The Wild Side

By Unknown

Once we saw them as gods
these soaring spirits of the sea.
How else to explain their
boundless grace and energy,
the way they inspire our joy.
Today, dolphins seem
like part of the family.
They enchant us with their
willingness to please and perform.
But the dolphin's true home - the sea
is an alien world and here
a different side emerges.
Cunning, powerful and relentless,
dolphins are consummate predators.
They are social creatures that
communicate and cooperate
for danger can strike from anywhere.
The quest for prey, the quest for mates,
nothing comes easy out here.
For the ocean is as unforgiving
as it is boundless.
Join us as we explore the world
of dolphins in the wild.
In the salt marshes of South
Carolina is a rich ocean estuary
a nursery for fish and shellfish
and a lure for all kinds
of predators.
Every day as
the tide ebbs,
the broad mud banks
become exposed.
It is then an extraordinary
event occurs.
Seabirds vie for
a front row position.
They have an intense
interest in what is to come.
The predators regroup
for another coordinated attack.
These are bottlenose dolphins
among the most inventive
and intelligent
hunters in the sea.

Here they locate schools of
small fish in the turbid channels.
Then in a stunning maneuver,
they rush up the mudflats
creating a bow wave
that drives the fish ashore.
Using their excellent
above-water vision,
they snatch up the fish
stranded on the banks.
How dolphins locate
the schools of fish
and coordinate their
attack is not entirely known
They may use either audible
or visual signals
For some reason
the dolphins always rush up
the banks on their right side
Over time
the teeth on that side will
actually be worn down from
chewing as much mud as fish
Occasionally
they will work themselves
completely out of the water
Being stranded up
here could be fatal
As they shimmy up the mud
banks it's almost as
if they're evolving into
the land creatures they once were
Some fifty million years ago
the ancestors
of these air-breathing
mammals ventured
into the seas
To follow dolphins
in the wild is to discover
one of the most remarkable
adaptations in the natural world
They use their intelligence
to survive
changing or inventing strategies

to suit their environment
Spinner dolphins leap in what
appears to a display of exuberance
In fact,
they may be signaling
others to join them,
or coordinating
movements of the pod...
A kind of long
distance communication.
At close range,
dolphins "speak" through
clicks and whistles.
These signals can
mean anything from
"Food's over here" to "Watch out!
There's danger!"
They also communicate
through touching.
Dolphins are notoriously affectionate
and extremely sensuous.
When dolphins mate,
they swim in rhythm
with the female on top.
Sex is as frequent
as it is casual.
It's not always
for reproduction
Often it's a social tool
used to strengthen
and maintain bonds
Whether old or young
male or female - all dolphins
engage in caressing and petting
But beneath this veneer
of harmony
lies a darker side...
marked by conflict and violence
Surprisingly the
beloved bottlenose we know
as "Flipper" may be the
most aggressive dolphin species
In the Bahamas
two male bottlenose harass

a male spotted dolphin
At first the interaction
seems harmless enough
but it quickly escalates
The bottlenose take
turns assaulting
the spotted perhaps
to assert their dominance
Next they turn on a spotted
dolphin half their size
It's only a calf
Bottlenose are among the
very few wild creatures
that will kill for reasons
other than hunger
Swimming in formation
a group of adult spotted
rush in to intercede
In the flurry of threats
the calf escapes
to the surface
Bottlenose are even
more prone to clashing
with members
of their own species
These males in the
Bahamas bear many scars
including those
from fierce battles
A first sign of impending
trouble is "jaw clapping"
a clear audible threat
When fights break out
they're marked
by head ramming
biting
and blows from
powerful flukes
Many dolphins have
evolved their own
sometimes brutal
aspects of society
Shark Bay
in Western Australia

where vast sea
grass beds support
a large community
of bottlenose dolphins
Here an international
team of scientists
investigates
dolphin aggression
The waters of Shark
Bay are in the throes
of what appears
to be a gang fight
Groups of males are observed
chasing down other males
It can go on for hours
and cover miles of territory
The battles are over females
part of an extremely complex social
system only now being unraveled
by Dr. Richard Connor from the
University of Massachusetts
He's spent his professional life
studying dolphins in the wild
And his work has changed
our image of the dolphin
I think in the 1960's
the myth was generated
that dolphins were
all sweetness and light
And almost incapable
of aggression
At least that was
the public perception
carried on a large
part until today
Dolphins are capable of
a lot of aggression
They can be quite nasty
depending on the circumstance
They are complex
intelligent social mammals
and that carries
with it a range of behaviors from
the nice to the not so nice

Just like in our own species
And like our own species
dolphins are
highly individualistic
To study their relationships
Connor needs to clearly
recognize individuals
He does this by their
unique fin markings
He's studied them in
Shark Bay since 1982
and he knows over
three hundred dolphins by name
and Minnie right there
between them.
And here comes Bad Ghost
and Poltergeist.
There's Wow resting at the surface.
There's Myrtle, there's Hobo.
Xxx and Horton?
Beautiful, look at that! All together.
Connor is
especially intrigued
by relationships
between the males
To him, it's like cracking
the code of a secret society
They follow a
mature male with
a jagged dorsal fin
named "Bottom Hook"
He's usually observed swimming
with another male called "Pointer"
They're almost inseparable forming
what Connor calls an alliance
Some of these alliances last
for a dozen years or more
Today a female is seen
swimming between them
as if she's being herded
In fact, she is
their captive
They guard her night and day
Very rarely do you see the female

off to the side from the males
They like to keep her
between them
That basically eliminates
avenues of escape for her
We've seen them keep females
for over a month at a time
Bottomhook and Pointer
are vigilant
Their strategy is to keep her
from mating with other males
To limit the female's
choice to themselves
We've often seen
the males use a lot of
aggression to keep
the female with them.
Even so, it's likely that the
female wants to mate
with these males as well as
other males in the bay
The males are trying
to sequester
the female simply
to increase the chance
that they will be
the father of the offspring
Eventually, the hungry males
must break formation to feed
Pointer races
off to chase a fish
It's a risky move
because in the
confusion the female
may try to escape
One male will be close to
the female for a while
The other will be off
foraging catching fish
And then they'll switch.
And the one that was
off chasing fish
will come back and
stay close to the female

Now here Pointer is rushing
back towards her now
As Pointer resumes
guard duty
he warns the female
with a popping sound

It means:

For other male
alliances are prowling
the bay in search of
females to capture
and they'll kidnap
them from rivals
But not without help
Connor found that
different alliances
will join forces
to kidnap females
or to defend against attacks
Some of these groups
have joined together
to form a nearly
invincible super-alliance
It consists of
fourteen males
and their captive females
Unique in the animal kingdom
Connor calls them the
"wow crowd"
We suspect from
what we can see
the "wow crowd" seems
to dominate
interactions in this area
Probably by being
in such a large group
they are able to
defeat other alliances
But we suspect that the way
they're always changing partners
is required to maintain
friendly bonds within the group
They have to

take turns cooperating
with each other
to sort of keep things
on a friendly basis
between all the alliances
Maintaining relations
in such a large
group is a
delicate proposition
But the pay-off is clear
Like a fierce tribe
the "wow crowd" dominates
other alliances
and can aggressively pursue
its goal of capturing females
It's easy to lose sight of the
females' role in all this
In fact, she is
the motivating force behind
much of this
Machiavellian male behavior
The females of
most dolphin species
have a mating strategy
of their own
And it calls for multiple
sexual partners
So in spite of the
males' best efforts to
restrict the females' choice
it's not entirely successful
This spotted dolphin
female in the Bahamas
mates with a number of
eager males
Any one of these partners may end
up being the father of her calf
In a surprising way
this strategy may protect
her future offspring
A female dolphin will usually
give birth to a single calf
after a year
long pregnancy

It'll be a few years before this one
becomes spotted like its mother
After giving birth
the female is unreceptive
during the calf's first
few years
She will spurn the advances
of courting males
But young males can be
dangerously persistent
Adult male dolphins may do
more than simply harass females
They are strongly suspected of
killing dolphin calves
a possible strategy for making
the female receptive again
This time
the mother fights them off
In Shark Bay, a female, Nicky
cruises the shallows with her calf
She's being herded by
Bottomhook and Pointer
Like most female dolphins
she's mated with a number of partners
So the scientists are not sure
who the father of the calf is
But then neither
are Bottomhook and Pointer
And in their uncertainty,
the calf is spared
Finding food is the
mother's top priority
and here in Shark
Bay she's discovered
some surprising resources
There's something
enchanted about
coming in contact
with dolphins in the wild
The activity is
carefully monitored to
avoid potential harm
to dolphins or to humans
Please, please don't reach

out to her head, please
That's Nicky;
she will bite you
Trust me
She hasn't bitten
anybody since yesterday...
If you're lucky
enough to be called out
Just step out
Hold the fish by the tail
Not the dolphin...
Place right down into
the dolphins mouths
Please do not be tempted
to touch during the feeding
that's when we can
have accidents
This kind of
interaction between humans
and wild dolphins
occurs in very few places
For some, it's a
healing experience
For others a kind of mystical,
New Age encounter
But to the hungry dolphins it's
mostly about getting a fish
If there's a lesson here
for the calf it's that
a dolphin must always
be inventive in finding food
For out in the wild
it's no easy task
Calves are dependent on their mothers
for some three to six years
During this period
the young dolphin must learn
how to fend for itself
Like humans, dolphins are not
born with the skills to survive
The learning process may start
through simple mimicry
The calf will imitate
its mother's every pose

posture and action
If she stands with her
tail in the sand
the calf will follow suit
Even though it may not have
an inkling of why she's doing so
Dolphins are opportunistic feeders
and the young must learn
many extremely difficult
and creative
hunting techniques
The mother is using
sound in a way
the calf may not be
capable of just yet
The buzzing sound is a series
of rapid fire clicks
part of a sophisticated sensory
system called echolocation
The sound signals
penetrate the sands
then echo back, giving a clear
indication of what lies below
It's like X-ray vision
capable of seeing through
almost any porous medium
Dolphin calves can create
sounds shortly after birth
mostly whistles
used for communication
The clicks required for echolocation
may take months to develop
Like most intelligent
predators
dolphins learn to hunt
by making a game out of it
This trunkfish is
not part of their diet
but for the young dolphins
it's a target to practice on
It takes an adult to
demonstrate proper form
Calves often wander away
from their mothers

sometimes up to half a mile
Though it can be dangerous
taking risks is an
important part of learning
These young dolphins
may not very adept
but at least they're
catching fish on their own
The mortality rate for
young dolphins is very high
In Shark Bay
fifty percent don't
survive their first year
Much depends on how
quickly the calf
can master new skills
for survival
A mother leads her calf on
strenuous runs in the shallows
The calf can
barely keep up
This is basic training
for a difficult
and dangerous
fishing strategy
It's a skill passed on from
generation to generation
The techniques that
dolphin calves learn
are often unique
to where they live
The steep cliffs of Cape Peron
block the prevailing winds
creating calm
clear waters along the beach.
Shallows can be dangerous
places for dolphins
Strandings are not
uncommon and here
they can easily be
cornered by predators
But the shallow water
is a hunting
ground for a small

group of specialists
Here they practice
a fishing technique
other dolphins find
too risky
The shallows would seem to
favor the smaller creature
But the dolphin has mastered
the art of hydroplaning
skimming through
mere inches of water
Sometimes breathing air
has its advantages
The sea eagle
who's watched the chase
with intense interest
times his
swoop perfectly
Of the four to five hundred
dolphins in Shark Bay
only a handful of females
have mastered this technique
Often dolphins play with
their catch before eating it
Just offshore a dolphin tosses
a snake eel about like a ragdoll
The others approach the tossed
prey with great interest
But they will not touch it
observing some kind of protocol
Scientists have speculated
it's a way of confirming
trust or simply avoiding
a costly conflict
When calves catch their tiny fish
they too make a great show of it
By five or six years old
young dolphins no longer
need their mother's guidance
They will be part
of a hunting culture that will
forever be as
challenging as it is perilous
Dolphins have

adapted to an alien world
that is hostile
to air-breathing mammals
In the dark of night
dolphins need to
know what's out there
Using their echolocation
dolphins can detect the size
shape- even the
density of an object
But it's only
good for a hundred yards
or so and is
highly directional
detecting nothing
from behind
It's so accurate
they can clearly
distinguish between
different species of fish
Even in daylight
visibility is limited underwater
But using sonar can
be risky because the
tell-tale clicks may reveal
your presence to predators
So dolphins rely more on
their excellent hearing
The best defense is to stay together
keep silent - and listen
Success in hunting is knowing
when to use your sonar
and when to turn it off
With its own
sonar turned off
a killer whale moves silently
through Alaskan waters - listening
It can hear the
slightest splashing
the very breathing
of distant prey
A group of Dall's porpoises
just up ahead
These are among the fastest

small cetaceans
so quick and agile they can
elude most predators
They travel these icy waters
in groups of two to ten
But for this small herd there's
little safety in numbers
As quietly as possible
the killer whales
are closing in
The slightest sound would
betray their presence
The porpoises
detect something
But it may be too late
The killers are capable of
speeds up to thirty miles per hour
The porpoise zigzags
for its life
Killer whales are masters at
cutting off the path of retreat
This one dives below
a harbor porpoise
Like sharks
killer whales don't always
finish off their prey
right away
They'll often let
the victim struggle until
it's energy is spent
or it simply bleeds to death
Other members of the pod
move in on a
Dall's porpoise that's
been hit
It still has some life
left and
tries to make it
to calmer inshore waters
The males- like lions tend to
leave the hunting to the females
Now they join
in for the kill
Soon the restless

seas are resonating
with the eerie calls
of the killers
and the chilling sounds of
teeth crushing bone
The porpoise had the
unhappy fate to be pursued
by hunters with sensory
capabilities as good as its own
For killer whales
are dolphins
They are the largest
member of the family and
the only dolphins that
habitually hunt their cousins
Still, they're the most
sociable of all dolphins
living in highly stable
family groups
Most of the males never leave
the group they are born in
Some will even teach
the calves how to hunt
This unfortunate
harbor seal is about
to become a living
training tool
The killer whales circle the prey
as if toying with it
In fact
they may be demonstrating
to their young how to
cut off a prey's retreat
or how to confuse it
More important the
calves will learn how to
coordinate their efforts
with others in the pod
Older males have been observed
allowing calves to feed
before they themselves
begin to eat
The young will grow into
the ocean's top predators

Like killer whales, pilot whales
are misnamed and are true dolphins
The second largest
of the family
they can weigh up
to four tons
Pilot whales dive to
depths of a half mile
in search of octopus
and squid
These pygmy killer
whales may be every
bit as fierce as
their namesakes
And like their bigger
cousins, they're
believed to kill
marine mammals
But pygmy killers are very rare
and seldom observed in the wild
There are over thirty
species of dolphins
and we know very little
about most of them
The northern right whale dolphin
is a gregarious
creature often found
swimming with other species
like white-sided dolphins.
Dolphins come in a
variety of sizes and shapes
What distinguishes
them as a family are anatomical
features like the shape
of the jaws and teeth
Dolphins are designed
for the hunt
This fifty ton monster
is a grazer not a hunter
And it's a true whale
Southern right whales
are filter feeders
straining enormous quantities
of water for tiny crustaceans

The windswept shores of
Patagonia in Argentina
Once a year
right whales migrate
to breed in the warm
shallow waters
Here they are greeted
by dusky dolphins
Unlike their big
lumbering cousins
duskys are small
fast, and agile
In the summer months
they leave the safety of coastal
waters to hunt miles offshore
In deep waters, locating
pursuing and catching prey
is exceptionally difficult
But duskys have developed
some extraordinary tactics
In the morning, small
search parties set out
probing with their sonar
There may be twenty to thirty
groups patrolling these waters
each pod separated
by a mile or two
The leaps give them a vantage
point for sighting prey
Seabirds have gathered up ahead
a sign they've found something
This time of year Southern
anchovies are here in vast numbers
For the penguins
it's a feast
It's up to the dolphins
to bring some
order to all this and
they quickly do
The dolphin's strategy is to
circle the school
and drive it into an
ever tightening ball
They guard the outside

perimeter by blowing bubbles
which frightens the fish
This takes advantage of
the fishes' natural defense
to huddle together
when attacked
As the fish ball
gets tighter
the dusks take turns
grabbing mouthfuls
of fish then retreat
to guard the perimeter
Soon the ball is
clustered so tightly
the fishes' escape
response breaks down
Now it's simply a
matter of the
dolphins' nipping food
off the edges
As the feeding progresses
the dolphin calves
are nowhere to be seen
For others drawn
to the feast might prefer
young dolphin to
a mouthful of anchovies
Mothers bring their calves
to a sort of nursery
away from the chaos
of the feeding area
For the rest of the group
the feeding's over
and it's time to celebrate
The event is marked by
exhilarating acrobatic displays
Dolphin groups that
usually travel
apart now come together
to socialize
In the world of dolphins
that means
frequent sex with a variety
of partners

The males- swimming upside down
follow the females
They synchronize their
movement with hers
all for a brief moment
of coupling
Physical contact among
these groups of
dolphins strengthens
communal bonds
For cooperative hunters
these bonds are essential
The duskys are about
to face a challenge
that calls for teamwork
on monumental scale
Sixty feet below the
surface, a monstrous swirl
of life undulates like a
strange super organism
It's a mass of anchovies over
a hundred feet in diameter
For these duskys
it's the mother lode
Circling the fish
with violent splashes
the duskys corral
them closer together
A team of dolphins
works below the school
herding it towards
the surface
They must keep the
enormous mass together
If it splits into
smaller schools
they'll be hard to control
Finally, they succeed
in herding the
great ball of fish to
the surface
It serves as a wall,
closing off one avenue of escape
Now sea lions are drawn

to the scene
The dolphins struggle to
keep the school together
but the sea lions are
not team players
They plunge into the
mass of fish to feed
The school is simply too large
for the dolphins to control
Now the leaps serve
a different purpose
High and acrobatic
they're calls for help
From miles away,
other dusky's rush to the feeding site
They porpoise high in the air to
keep sight of the action ahead
By the time they
reach the school
there's a feeding
frenzy going on
Chaos reigns and the ball
is in danger of splitting apart
The new arrivals
get right to work
and quickly coordinate their
efforts with the other dusky's
Now there are enough dolphins
to guard
the perimeter while
they take turns feeding
Finally all the dolphins'
hard work pays off
The fish have been
packed together
so long they've consumed
too much oxygen
There's little chance the
ball will split apart
For the dolphins who can now
feed at will this hunt is over
To ancient mariners
the dolphins' mastery of
the ocean world seemed magical

They were cast as heroes
in myth and legend
Today we look for glimpses
of ourselves in dolphins
And we find them
in their conflicts
yes - but also in the ways
they communicate and cooperate
their sheer inventiveness.
But there's no need
to romanticize or humanize
dolphins to respect
them for what they are
Strong and intelligent hunters
in a wilderness called the sea