

SC Dolphin Tagging Study

September 2005

Vagabonds in Every Sense

Science likes to group animals in terms of not only body characteristics but also based on similar behavior. The term “Oceanic Pelagic Species” is applied to a very diverse group of fishes that include such well known top level predators as sharks, marlins, and tunas. Dolphin and wahoo are also members of this group. The common bond among such starkly different animals is that they call the Gulf Stream home and they are presumed to travel long distances wandering the Atlantic each year. However, in many instances as with the dolphin and wahoo found off the east coast of the US, science does not know where they come from or where they go after they leave US waters.

During its first three year of research, the South Carolina Dolphin Study had only one tagged fish recovered over 1,000 miles from its release site. This was a dolphin that traveled from Key Largo, Florida to Ocean City, Maryland in 93 days. Now in 2005, three tagged fish recaptures have surpassed the 1000 miles mark.

The first two fish in 2005 to be recovered over 1,000 miles from their release site were the dolphin released off Charleston, South Carolina and recovered off Majahaul, Mexico and the Azores Islands. Now a dolphin tagged off Islamorada, Florida has joined this small group of long distance travelers.

On June 28 Cynetha Lee caught a small dolphinfish while fishing aboard *Killin Time* off Islamorada. Don Gates, the boat’s owner and captain from Chuluota, FL, quickly tagged and released the fish. Just 45 days later Mike Benjamin of North East, Maryland recovered the dolphin during a fishing trip aboard a friend’s boat, *Rock Hound*, to the Baltimore Canyon off Ocean City, MD. This is a distance of 1,046 miles from where the fish was originally released. As impressive as this distance is, it does not begin to reveal the total distance the fish traveled when you consider the lateral and vertical movements made during feeding or body temperature regulation.

Anglers have reported 3 additional tag recoveries since the last newsletters bringing the number of tagged dolphinfish recovered this year to 37. This raises the number of reported tag recoveries for the study to an impressive 112 since its start in 2002.

The new recoveries continued to exhibit the long distance travel trend exhibited by dolphin recaptured in 2005. A fish tagged by Francis Johnson in June while fishing aboard the *Special Lady* out of Charleston, SC was recovered 17 days and 324 miles later off Oregon Inlet, NC. The fish was recovered by Jack Cassells of Glen Allen, Virginia during fishing trip aboard the charter vessel *Samana*. This the second tagged dolphin recovered in 2005 by Captain Huck Harris on the *Samana* out of Oregon Inlet.

One of the last two recoveries cast a shadow over or adds a new wrinkle to an earlier hypothesis regarding dolphin found in the Straits of Florida after July 1. In past years no fish tagged after July 1 off the Florida Keys has been recovered to the north along the US east coast. This fuels speculation that



these fish may be traveling between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Until 2005, only one short term recovery, 2 days liberty and 94 miles movement, had been reported for these summer dolphin off the Keys. This year a fish tagged by Justin Brown on July 24 off Islamorada, FL during a fishing trip with his father, Don Brown of Pembroke Pines, FL has clouded this issue. The dolphin was recovered was just 21 days later off Morehead City, NC, 708 miles from its original release site. It was recovered by Art Chleborowicz of Pine Knoll Shores, NC while fishing aboard the *Work of Art*. This is the 8th recovery of a dolphin tagged by Justin and Don in 2005.

The final recovery report comes from Robert Hopkins of Milton, Delaware who recaptured a tagged dolphin on August 20 during a fishing trip off the New Jersey coast. The fish had been tagged and released 105 days earlier off Charleston, SC by the crew of Mike Leatherwood’s boat *Blue Endeavor* out of Charleston. Having traveled 495 miles from its original release site, this recovery becomes the most northern recovery of a tagged dolphin in 2005.

Tag recoveries during 2005 have high lighted just how highly mobile dolphinfish really can be. Six fish have been recovered more than 700 miles from their release site. Only 7 fish in the previous three years of the study had moved such distances. Four dolphinfish traveled from the Keys to North Carolina or beyond in 21 days or less. These are truly amazing fish of the high seas. This study has just begun to reveal the long distances which these fish travel each year and magnitude of their annual migration.

Dolphin Tagging To End in 2005

North of Cape Hatteras & Gulf – October 1
South of Cape Hatteras – September 1

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Summer Tagging Results in New Record

2005 Tagging Progress By Zone as of September 1

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	E. Bahamas	22N	28N	63
2	FL Straits	23N	25N	787
3	South Florida	25N	27N	421
4	Central Florida	27N	30N	44
5	North FL & GA	30N	32N	36
6	Central SC	32N	33N	256
7	N. SC - S. NC	33N	35N	19
8	Northern NC	35N	36.5N	4
9	Virginia	36.5N	38N	2
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38N		10
11	Gulf of Mexico			10
			Total	1,654

The number of dolphin being tagged in 2005 got off to a very slow start. However, due to the unusually high level of tagging occurring in July and August, the project will maintain its trend of increased number of fish tagged each year of the study. With over 780 dolphin tagged during July and August, the study is well ahead of last year's numbers. Over 75 percent of the 1,654 dolphin tagged this year, were tagged off the Florida coast.

Through out the Dolphin Study, Florida fishermen have been major contributors to marking dolphin for this research project. This year, fishermen in Zones 2 and 3 have carried the annual tagging to a record level. This was largely due to their tagging efforts during July and August when they marked and released 636 fish. The 384 dolphin tagged during July in the Florida Straits is the largest number tagged in one zone in a single month for the project. This High level of tagging could be the results of the unusually large concentrations of small dolphin, 10 to 18 inches fork length, found in the Florida Straits and south Florida this summer.

Anglers in Zone 3, South Florida, have also made their largest contribution of any year. The 421 dolphin tagged off South Florida this year is more than tagged in the area during all previous years combined.

Turn in Your Dolphin Tagging Reports

Fishermen wishing to compete for the year end awards for tagging the most dolphin need to get their cards in to be counted. All tagging report cards must be received at the Dolphin Tagging Study office by 5:00 p.m. October 14.



Over the last four years, recoveries of dolphin tagged by sports fishermen have shown these majestic gamefish to travel faster and range over a larger portion of the Central Atlantic than previously believed.

Thanks to the Sponsors Supporting this Study



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For more information on the project, visit
<http://dolphintagging.homestead.com> or contact

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