

## Backyard Briefs

*A weekly column*

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The prolonged drought of the Roanoke River basin affects us all, humans, wildlife, vegetation, and even the creatures that live in our rivers and sound. In the waterways, the drought creates low water flow conditions allowing more salt water from the Atlantic to seep up into the Albemarle Sound, the Roanoke and other tributaries. As a result saltwater fish, such as tarpon, Spanish mackerel and black bass, have wandered into the Albemarle and critters that we do not usually see upriver are coming to visit as well. Just recently there were two separate sightings of either a porpoise or bottle-nosed dolphin swimming gracefully just above Jamesville.

Do not get bottle-nosed dolphin mixed up with the fish called dolphin. Bottle-nosed dolphins are mammals; “Flipper” was a bottle-nosed dolphin. Dolphin, porpoise, and whales are all in the same family. The harbor porpoise and bottle-nosed dolphin can look very similar at a glance, but if you can get close enough, there are some basic differences that help to tell them apart. A good look at the dorsal fin will help. Porpoise have a triangular fin but the dolphin’s is curved or moon-shaped. Bottle-nosed dolphins have a bottle shaped nose looking a bit like a beak, but a porpoise’s nose is blunt.

Behavior is yet another way to tell these mammals apart. Dolphin and porpoise may be related, but there is a big difference in behavior. Porpoises are calm quiet swimmers, shy of boats and people. Dolphins are quite the opposite, they often leap out of the water, and rollicking groups play in the breakers. They are known to seek out large fast-moving boats, racing just ahead and then bodysurfing in the bow waves. So, if there is perky zipping about, with leaps in the air, or lots of quick movement, or perhaps even interest in you, then you are looking at a dolphin.

The North Carolina Coast is at the southern most edge of the harbor porpoise’s range, but bottle-nosed dolphin live all along the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of Mexico. We expect to see both of these mammals occasionally in the sounds along the North Carolina coast, but it is very unusual to see one 25 miles up the Roanoke. Most likely the critter seen above Jamesville was lured upstream by a tasty school of fish, something both of these mammals enjoy.