



The Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin jumps into the air

I hesitate to write about these creatures of the sea, because the less people know the safer they would be. But to protect them we need to know... We were told when we first inquired that sightings of these animals were very rare and that we would be lucky to see them. Luck was on our side—and as I have said so many times before animals know that we are only there to observe and mean no harm—as if by instinct the Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins, also known as Pink Dolphins emerged from the water...

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We left the shores of Kalpitiya in a Sri Lanka Navy Waver Rider around 7.30 in the morning as the best time to see Humpback Dolphins was within a span of one hour from that time. This dolphin is seen only in the Kalpitiya lagoon where the water is somewhat shallow and the sea grass that they eat is prevalent in abundance. We were told by the Navy Officer, that they had not seen the Humpback Dolphin in a while. We were hoping and praying that our efforts won't be in vain. Known to be friendly animals, these dolphins do not hide or disappear when they see boats, this could be the reason as to why their numbers have decreased drastically as they can easily be captured. The Humpback Dolphin is a near threatened animal and is on the red list of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

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While enjoying the light breeze and scanning the lagoon waters, there was a sudden movement and a shout from within the boat, the Humpback Dolphin had been spotted! And, it wasn't one but five, diving and emerging from the water. We slowly pushed forward towards them. The closer we got I was able to see their unique body. They were almost stubby with short bodies. They were lighter in shade and had a hint of pink on their dorsal fin and tail. Their snouts are longer and face is a lighter shade of grey... nearing white. What gives them their name is the dorsal hump, where the fin is much more smaller than the other types of dolphins.

We watched them for a long time. They dive and suddenly emerge, float for a while and dive again. They were feeding on the sea grass and then coming up for a rest. At times they

would start playing... swimming together and pushing each other. Suddenly one of them jumped into the air and splashed in the water when landing. As their bodies are heavier than other dolphins, they cannot jump too high and they make an almost 'flat' splashing noise when landing. We were told that the Humpback Dolphins are usually seen in pods of four or five. We were hoping that there were much more than that.

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In this playful group, two of them were together while the other three formed a separate group. We followed them for a while as they swam from one point to another. At times they would come towards us with their faces just visible for a moment. My friends had a time trying to capture them on camera. For a somewhat 'chubby' animal the Humpback Dolphins were quite quick. We continued to follow them only to reach a shallow area where the boat could not go any further. It was getting warmer and the sun was getting brighter, the five Humpback Dolphins swam away undoubtedly with their bellies full to a cooler location. The fact that not many boats enter the lagoon has resulted in the remaining population of Humpback Dolphins being protected.

Our morning was not yet over, we headed towards deep sea passing the many islets of Kalpitiya to finally exit the lagoon at 'Kimbula Bokka'. The boat gathered speed and we were cruising on the ocean, about one nautical mile from the coast. There was nothing but the large blue ocean, calm and deep with a world unknown below its depth. My friends and I became excited when we saw water being sprayed out of the water indicating that whales were there but they were too far away, I was only able to see the dorsal fin of one (out of three) as it swam across.

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We passed Talawila, where the famous church of St Anne's is located and soon the Norochcholai power plant was in our view. And yes, hundreds of Spinner Dolphins swimming and playing. At times swimming in parallel with the boat and under the boat while others displaying their acrobatic skills diving and spinning in the air. It was almost as if they were playing with us, with their mischievous smiles encouraging us to follow them farther. As the sun was rising higher into the sky and it was getting hotter by the minute,

A Morning With Dolphins In Kalpitiya

this massive pod of Spinner Dolphins started to disperse. We too turned around and headed back to land. It had been a perfect morning to say the least...

