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## October: the La Plata Dolphin

### Year of the Dolphin – our Dolphin of the Month

Dear Dolphin Friend,

From the largest to the smallest dolphin, the Orca to Hector's Dolphin, there are many differences between these marine mammals. Yet, they have one thing in common: they are all endangered.

This is why the United Nations, within the framework of their environmental program, have declared 2007 to be the Year of the Dolphin. A comprehensive strategy aims to implement globally needed protection measures. The Convention on Migratory Species CMS and the WDCS are partners in this initiative.

The Year of the Dolphin 2007 has given us the opportunity to present one species of dolphin in more detail each month. October's dolphin is the La Plata Dolphin (*Pontoporia blainvillei*), also known as the Franciscana, a small river dolphin species that inhabits the waters off South America's central Atlantic coast.



What are the distinctive features of the La Plata Dolphin?

The small dolphins possess an unusually long beak – relative to their body length it's the longest of all dolphins' beaks. They have a stocky build with a curved stomach, their coloration is grayish-brown on top, paler on the underside. With reference to its markings, which resemble the clothing of Franciscan monks, it is also called the Franciscana. The nearly triangular flippers are broad, as is the fluke, which constitutes almost one third of the body length. The eyes are small, but very well developed.

As mentioned above, the La Plata Dolphin is one of the smallest cetaceans: newborn calves weigh only 7,3 to 8,5 kg and are 70 to 80 cm long. Fully grown specimens reach approx. 1,30 – 1,80 m and weigh between 30 and 53 kg, with females growing larger than males.

Where does the La Plata Dolphin live and what are typical behavioral traits?

Despite its close relatedness to other river dolphins, it is not a real river dolphin, for it lives in the ocean and occurs in flat coastal waters. It inhabits the temperate waters off the eastern South-American coast. The known area of repartition extends from the Doce river in Brazil to the Bahía Blanca in Argentina. The animals seem to prefer water depths of around 9 meters.

They are most frequently seen in and close to the La Plata river's estuary, but do not go upstream further than Buenos Aires. Genetic and morphological evidence indicates that there are at least two populations of Franciscana, a southern (La Plata River area) and a northern one. The fact that they are seldom seen during the winter months suggests that they undertake a seasonal migration to warmer waters during this time.

There are only few reports on the La Plata Dolphin, and information concerning its behavior are rare. These secretive and inconspicuous animals are easily missed. They generally avoid boats, but are known sometimes to approach small fishing boats.

It is assumed that they forage for food (fish, squid, crabs) mostly on the seabed. When confronted with predators, e.g. Sharks, they tend to freeze and remain motionlessly near the water surface. Herd size varies from 2 to 15 individuals, with calves being born mostly during spring.

Which dangers and threats do La Plata Dolphins face?

Being caught and drowning in fishnets, especially sharknets, is the most frequent cause of death for this species. In addition, they are threatened by human-induced food scarcity, chemical pollution and the destruction of their habitat. As are many other dolphin species, La Plata dolphins are good bioindicators of changes in fish stocks.

Protection through international agreements

The World Conservation Union IUCN lists the species as „data deficient“, meaning that there is too little information to clearly define their conservation status. The Bonn Convention (CMS, Convention on the conservation of Migratory Species) lists the La Plata Dolphin in Appendix I. This obliges all CMS-Parties to undertake efforts for the protection of this species and to adopt threat-reducing measures.

Miguel Iguinez, WDCCS-scientist and whale and dolphin expert in Latin America, saw his first Franciscana 20 years ago:

„In the mid 1980s, I saw Franciscana Dolphins for the first time in the Bay of San Blas, in southern Argentina. I was in the area with a colleague to make observations from land. It was impressive. I remember jumping out of the car before it had even stopped to take a picture. It didn't turn out very good, but I was happy nonetheless.

The main threat to the species is bycatch, and the estimated yearly death count for the Franciscana in their entire area of occurrence is no less than 1500! To protect the animals, we have to conduct further studies on their behavior and surveys on their preferred habitat, with the goal of then establishing a marine protected area that meets all their needs.”

More information on the project under [www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org)

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