

# **Poor Knights Dolphin Encounters**

**For a period of years Wade Doak made a study of unusual, often complex diver/dolphin interactions at the Poor Knights Islands -for the most part dolphin-initiated.**

**Prologue :**

**DOLPHINS ENCOUNTERS in the POOR KNIGHTS AREA**

In May 1971, at the Poor Knights Islands, 22 kilometres off the east coast of northern New Zealand, I had been 20 metres down where white sand lies in drifts at the foot of the Rikoriko cave wall. Suddenly everything went black. I glanced up in fear. The cave portal, usually a blaze of blue fire, had dimmed. It was seething with huge shapes - sharp fins, fast tails and jaws. Dolphins. One of them, in silhouette on the surface, smacked its tail and a pair of curving forms glided down in a spiral, circling me and rising. Each time the leader of this game smacked with his tail a pair spiralled down, curving on their sides to gaze intently as they passed me. Enchanted, I forgot for some time that I had a camera. Then with the last two frames left on the film I took my first dolphin pictures - *Tursiops truncatus*, the bottlenose. A seed was sown.

After our El Torito adventures in the South Pacific, my family settled down to a rural life in a small cottage beside a mangrove river in Northland, New Zealand. It was one evening in April 1975, after a superb day's diving at the Poor Knights Islands, that I told Jan, Brady and Karla of a most unusual experience (little knowing how much it was to change our lives).

Along with biologists, Barry Russell, Tony Ayling and two other companions, Cathy Drew and Les Grey, we were returning to the mainland in my runabout when we met up with a vast school of bottlenose dolphins, four miles off Tutukaka Harbour. Our 'deep vee' was bucking over a switchback sea, running so fast we clipped the wave crests, virtually airborne. The five of us were totally exhilarated after the day's diving. Suddenly, there were dolphins ahead of the boat. They raced to meet it, arching from the water as they rose to breathe, making their presence known. I eased the machine to whale speed and the dolphins adjusted their tails to its pressure wave. They surfed ahead of us, cavorting from port to starboard, rolling on their sides to eye the glassy white hull and its occupants hanging over the bow shouting encouragement and slapping the hull with staccato rhythms. Both species, man and cetacean, had begun gamesplay.

Looking back, I feel that I acted in a premeditated way. I recall that our fast ride had begun in the cathedral-quiet green twilight of Rikoriko, 'Cave of Echoes', the 25-metre-high dome inside Aorangi, chief of the Poor Knights. We had taken Cathy, the New York photographer, in there to view its vastness and had grown silent as we studied the vaulting roof with delicate ferns clinging to it, marvelling at the dim light they tolerate.

Now, as the dolphins moved to meet our fast-running boat, I knew exactly what I wanted to do when I met dolphins on the bow. I wanted to slow to a crawl, put the boat in a wide circle and leap into the centre with my camera. I wanted dolphin photos, at this stage with the thought that they would satisfy a publisher's request.

Tony took the wheel and I plunged in. My strategy worked - dolphins were frolicking around the bow like circus ponies, with me as ringmaster. I fired off my photos, then became aware that roles were changing. The boat had stopped and I was now at the centre of a cyclone of dolphins. I called to Tony and the others to join me, but one at a time, and 'let's all do the dolphin-kick'.

On island voyages with Dr Walt Starck we often entered villages where there was a language barrier. To our delight the kids would open up communication through playful mimicry and dance. During our dolphin games each diver in his sealed-off world became aware that the dolphins were demonstrating new tricks. I was weaving among them with a fluid dolphin drive, my fins undulating together like a broad tail in a movement that began at my head and rippled along my body. A dolphin drew alongside me. By counter-opposing its flippers, like the ailerons of a plane making a spin, it barrel-rolled right in front of my mask. Maintaining the dolphin-kick, I imitated this corkscrew manoeuvre, counter-opposing my hands held close to my chest. The response was slow as my pseudo-flippers were tiny and my speed a fraction of theirs, but I found myself rolling wing over wing. Then something startling happened. The moment my spin was complete a formation of six dolphins abreast of me and on the same side as before, repeated that trick in unison, reinforcing my newly acquired mimicry pattern. And so it went on, the sea wild with energy, a maelstrom of dolphins, their shrill chorusing whistles dinning in our ears.

We gambolled with them for about an hour until utterly exhausted. Then one by one we hauled ourselves in over the stern. Around us we could now see salvos of dolphins leaping singly or in symmetrical pairs for a mile in every direction. We must have met a whole tribe of bottlenose dolphins on their passage along the coast.

As we towelled ourselves warm I commented how marvellous it was that such huge, sharp-toothed animals, each as heavy and as fast as my boat, had not even buffeted us by their swirling movements. 'Only once,' said Tony Ayling who had been last on board. As he was approaching the stern, one dolphin rushed to within a metre of him and had stopped short, vertical in the water, with flippers flung wide as if imploring us to continue. We felt we had let them down. I gave the hull a resounding thump. From a short way off a tail smacked on the surface in answer. I thumped again. Eight times we exchanged signals, and that was it. For the next year I devoured every written word I could find on dolphins and whales. Knowledge of dolphins, I found, was based almost entirely on captive animals. How much could be learned about our species from a study of people in prison? Jane Goodall had shown what could be done through behavioural fieldwork with wild dogs and chimpanzees and proved that much more could be learned about these creatures when they were studied in their natural surroundings. But gaining acceptance of terrestrial mammals is far easier than with ocean-dwellers. As I have related in my book **Encounters with Whales and Dolphins**, I set out to make a study of human /dolphin encounters. In the Poor Knights area, probably because a great deal of diving activity takes place there all year around, and because feedback of encounter stories has created a receptive culture towards dolphins, divers have reported unusually complex and prolonged interactions.

## Dolphin Encounters in the Poor Knights Area

In the Poor Knights area following our own intensive series of encounters\*, divers continue to meet bottlenose dolphin pods that seem to include these islands in their range, especially during winter months, but quite often in January too. Common dolphins are met more frequently during springtime.

Because this area is one of the most popular diving areas in New Zealand and perhaps because of our own input [ these stories have been published in diving magazines] the frequency and complexity of encounters is of a high order. We think dolphins in this region have developed a readiness to interact with divers which will be apparent from these accounts.

Graham Thomson was diving in the Poor Knights area mid-winter 1978 and met a group of bottlenose dolphins with whom we have had contact on a number of occasions. As other divers approached these dolphins in a similar friendly manner they too found the dolphins most responsive to playful antics and mimicry.

On June 13, 1978 Graham was aboard **Lady Jess** nearing the Pinnacles when some two hundred bottlenose approached and several began bow riding.

The vessel anchored and fifteen divers, only two with scuba including Graham, entered the water. Some divers began doing the dolphin kick, snorkelling down frequently with fancy manoeuvres and forward rolls. Some of the dolphins remained with them for about forty minutes. There were young present, about six to eight, in the group that stayed.

Graham remarks: "The dolphin in my photo (one which Jan and I had met frequently) was by far the most playful and seemed to be the instigator in evolving the games we attempted to play. The others played and observed us, but he was the most interested. He would come straight towards us at breakneck speed and stop instantaneously about a metre away, then spin round and round us two or three times before zooming in again. We saw the jaw open and closing

gesture.

If we did the dolphin kick at least two or three dolphins, sometimes more, would swim parallel with us. We tried doing forward and backward rolls. My camera housing made this difficult. My buddy, Andy Smyth managed some strange antics which attracted a fair bit of attention. Andy proved the sort of guy you want when playing with dolphins. He seemed to know when to sit back and watch and when to play.

Mothers were bringing their young in fairly close, to within a metre and the young were on the inside towards us, as if mum was saying to them - "Go on, have a good look. They're too clumsy to hurt you".

This sort of thing lasted around forty minutes until we were exhausted and had to retire to the boat.

On board we could see they had broken up into separate groups - some with each pair of divers. People wearing scuba couldn't get anywhere near as close as those just on snorkel. The dolphins hung around for most of the day while we had towed scuba dives, joining a number of us while down on scuba.

There was no real topside action, fancy leaps etc. other than coming up and checking on the boat when it was moving around picking up divers. Interesting to see the number of snapper feeding below the dolphins".

**EXTRACT ENDS**