

Irrawaddy Dolphin

Dolphins are among the most fascinating and intelligent creatures on the planet. These marine mammals are known for their playful behaviour, acrobatic skills, and highly social nature. With over 40 different species of dolphins found in waters around the world, these animals have captured the attention and admiration of humans for centuries. From the acrobatic spins of the bottlenose dolphin to the unique pink coloration of the Amazon river dolphin, each species has its own distinct characteristics that make them fascinating to study and observe.

Features

Sl. No.	Characteristics	Description
1	Common Name	Irrawaddy dolphin
2	Scientific Name	Orcaella brevirostris
3	Length	2.4 to 2.7 metres
4	Colour	bluish-grey to dark grey skin colour
5	Average weight	130 to 200 kilograms
6	Food habits	herring, mullet, catfish, crustaceans and cephalopods
7	Habitat	found in Southeast Asia and parts of Oceania, inhabiting shallow coastal waters, estuaries, and rivers
8	Any interesting facts about them	They are also known for their cooperative fishing behaviour, where they work together with local fishermen in some regions to catch fish

The Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) is a marine mammal that inhabits shallow coastal waters, estuaries, and rivers in Southeast Asia and parts of Oceania. The Irrawaddy dolphin has a bluish-grey to dark grey skin colour, with a lighter underside. Some individuals may have pinkish tones around the mouth and throat area. Male Irrawaddy dolphins can reach a length of up to 2.7 metres (8.9 feet), while females are slightly smaller, with a length of up to 2.4 meters (7.9 feet). They can weigh between 130 to 200 kilograms (290 to 440 pounds). The Irrawaddy dolphin has a round, bulbous head with no beak. They have a stocky and muscular body with a dorsal fin that is small and triangular in shape. They also have a short and blunt snout, and their teeth are usually not visible when their mouths are closed. The Irrawaddy dolphin has a unique way of surfacing, where it slowly raises its head out of the water and then rolls backward, disappearing without showing much of its body. They are also known for their cooperative fishing behaviour, where they work together with local fishermen in some regions to catch fish. Another interesting feature of the Irrawaddy dolphin is its ability to inflate its nose to produce a distinctive buzzing sound that can be heard both above and below water.

Food Habits

Irrawaddy dolphins are known to feed on a variety of fish species, including herring, mullet, and catfish, as well as crustaceans and cephalopods. They are also known to engage in cooperative fishing behavior with local fishermen, where they herd fish towards the fishing nets and then share in the catch.

Habitats

The Irrawaddy dolphin is found in Southeast Asia and parts of Oceania, inhabiting shallow coastal waters, estuaries, and rivers. In India, the species is primarily found in the Sundarbans delta and the Chilika Lake.

The Sundarbans delta, which is located in the states of West Bengal and Odisha, is the largest delta in the world and is home to a significant population of Irrawaddy dolphins. The Chilika Lake, which is located in the state of Odisha, is the largest brackish water lagoon in Asia and is also an important habitat for the species.

Vulnerable Species

The Irrawaddy dolphin is considered endangered in India due to various threats, including habitat loss, pollution, and entanglement in fishing gear. The exact number of Irrawaddy dolphins in India is not known, but their population is estimated to be between 200 and 300 individuals. The construction of dams, water diversion projects, and other development activities can reduce the availability of suitable habitats for the species. The discharge of untreated sewage, industrial waste, and agricultural runoff can contaminate the water and reduce the quality of the habitat, affecting the health of the dolphins and their prey. Irrawaddy dolphins can become entangled in fishing nets, leading to injury or death. They are also sometimes deliberately targeted by fishermen for their meat and oil. Rising sea levels, changes in water temperature and salinity, and other effects of climate change can also impact the species' habitat and food sources.

Conservation efforts are underway to protect the remaining populations of Irrawaddy dolphins in India. These include efforts to reduce pollution and regulate fishing practices, as

well as initiatives to promote public awareness and support for conservation efforts. However, the species remains vulnerable to these threats, and continued efforts are needed to ensure its survival.

Protected Areas

India is home to several national parks that are managed and protected by the government to conserve and preserve the country's rich biodiversity.

The first protected area for Irrawaddy dolphins in India was established in 1998 in the Chilika Lake, which is located in the eastern state of Odisha. This area is known as the Chilika Lake Sanctuary and covers an area of approximately 1,100 square kilometres. In this sanctuary, fishing is strictly regulated, and boats are not allowed to come within a certain distance of the dolphins. The Chilika Lake Sanctuary is also home to a variety of other aquatic species, including several species of fish and birds.

In addition to these protected areas, the Indian government has also designated several other areas as critical habitats for Irrawaddy dolphins. These include the Sundarbans delta in West Bengal, the Mahanadi river in Odisha, and the Hooghly river in West Bengal.

The establishment of protected areas for Irrawaddy dolphins in India is an important step towards ensuring the long-term survival of this endangered species. By regulating fishing and protecting critical habitats, these areas help to reduce the threats facing Irrawaddy dolphins and other aquatic species in India's freshwater and marine ecosystems.

Conservation of the Species

Conserving these dolphin species will require a multi-faceted approach involving several different strategies.

Protecting the natural habitats of these dolphin species is crucial. This includes maintaining water quality, preventing pollution, and regulating the use of river systems, estuaries, and coastlines.

Human activities such as fishing, boating, and development can have a significant impact on dolphin populations. Reducing the impact of these activities by regulating fishing practices, reducing noise pollution, and minimising boat traffic can help to preserve dolphin populations.

Raising awareness of the importance of these dolphin species and their habitats can help to generate support for conservation efforts. Education programs can be implemented for local communities, schools, and tourists to teach them about the importance of these species.

Conducting research and monitoring programs can help to better understand these species and their habitats. This information can be used to develop effective conservation strategies and monitor the success of these efforts over time. Effective conservation efforts will require collaboration and partnerships between various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, local communities, and researchers. By working together, these groups can develop and implement effective conservation strategies to protect these dolphin species.

With the increase in marine tourism activities such as boat rides and water sports, it is important to regulate these activities in a manner that ensures the safety and conservation of dolphins. This can be done by enforcing strict guidelines on boat traffic, keeping a safe distance from

dolphins, and avoiding activities that can cause stress or harm to dolphins.

Pollution can be extremely harmful to dolphin populations. This includes plastic pollution, chemical pollution, and noise pollution. Reducing pollution levels in the environment can help to protect these species and their habitats.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the conservation of these dolphin species is critical to maintain the biodiversity of our planet and the health of aquatic ecosystems. We must take concerted efforts to protect these intelligent and charismatic creatures from habitat loss, human impact, pollution, and other threats. By implementing the strategies mentioned above, we can ensure the long-term survival of these unique species and the preservation of their habitats for future generations.