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*Reflections of the Gulf Coast*

## UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Dolphins at IMMS make learning fun

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Artist keeping  
memories alive

### A HISTORIC REVIVAL

at the new Maritime &  
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**LEISURE** a whole new world



**ALEXIS SCHENCK**  
getting a kiss from Bo,  
a dolphin at Institute  
for Marine Mammal  
Studies in Gulfport.

# UPCLOSE & PERSONAL

story by **Lynn Lofton**  
photos by **Teddy Lewis**

Experience the world of dolphins at  
Institute for Marine Mammal Studies



**LEFT: BO IS SHOWING** off for the crowd with a big jump. **RIGHT: Vickie Burrage, Alexis Schenck and Missy Mitchell** enjoy the dolphin interaction with Bo the dolphin and Trainer Kelly Pulis.

**W**ho can resist dolphins? Their intelligence, friendly disposition and ‘smiling’ faces make them popular with humans. After all, we share several traits with them — like us dolphins are mammals, meaning they are warm blooded, give birth live and nurse their young. Now there are several ways to enjoy seeing and being with dolphins at the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies (IMMS) in Gulfport.

A presentation with dolphins working with their trainers is part of the family tour, and to get up close and personal with these adorable creatures there is a dolphin encounter and a dolphin experience.

Alexis Schenck of Rockwell, North Carolina, had the dolphin experience while visiting relatives in Gulfport. The 15 year old enjoyed learning facts

about the dolphins and getting in the water with them. “They’re interesting creatures, and it was fascinating the way they learned the whistle commands,” she said. “The tricks blew my mind. It was really a great experience.”

The IMMS is home to four Atlantic Bottlenose dolphins; one female and three males. Bo, the female, and Buster are retired Navy dolphins who are 37 and 34 years of age. “The Navy doesn’t tell us what Bo and Buster did, but there’s a lot to be learned from dolphins and that’s why we study them,” said Emma Jarvis, marine mammal training supervisor at IMMS.

The other two resident dolphins are C.J. and Apollo, both of whom were stranded and can not be released back into the wild. “We performed C.J.’s rescue and at age two years he was too young to be released because dolphins spend their first six years close to their mothers,” Jarvis said. “Apollo was

rescued by the Audubon Society in New Orleans. He was stranded on a marsh and had a bad sun burn and is hearing impaired.”

She notes that every dolphin has its own personality and that each one’s dorsal fin is like a finger print, showing scars and other personal markings. “From that, we have charter boat captains and others tell us they see the same dolphins year after year,” she said. “In the wild, dolphins live to their mid 20s but can live longer in captivity under human care.”

The two dolphin interaction programs were started in 2011. Both programs include an orientation before meeting the dolphins and reservations must be made before coming to the facility. For the encounter, visitors stand on the dock and are allowed to touch and feed the dolphins while observing their behaviors. With the experience, adults and children age 8 and up get into the water with the >>

# LEISURE a whole new world



**ABOVE:** AT IMMS, they cater to school tours where kids come to learn all about the dolphins and see how they interact with the trainers.

**FAR LEFT:** Visitors can experience many other wildlife creatures in the petting tank. **LEFT BOTTOM:** Skipper is showing off the horseshoe crab to visitors. **BELOW:** Alexis Schenck holds the albino python that lives at IMMS.



dolphins. Trainers are in the water at all times and the participants are in the water for 15 minutes. "We get a lot done during that time. Participants can feed and touch the dolphins," Jarvis said, "and there's a lot of education involved. We cater to what people want to talk about. We have people coming from all over for the dolphin experience."

At the conclusion of the dolphin experience, visitors have photos made and can pose hugging or kissing these delightful marine mammals.

"We try to make learning fun," says Moby Solangi, Ph.D, executive director of IMMS. "People love dolphins; they epitomize nature and they are the 'canary in the mine' because if they're healthy, the environment is healthy."

Solangi has been on the Coast 40 years and established the IMMS in 1984. It's been at its current location since 2009. In addition to the dolphin encounter and experience, the IMMS hosts field trips, summer camps and other educational programs. "We're all about research, education and conservation," he said, "and we specialize in endangered and threatened species, including dolphins, manatees and sea turtles."

Complete information about the dolphin interaction programs, including costs and times, can be found at [www.IMMS.org](http://www.IMMS.org).

*Institute for  
Marine Mammal Studies  
10801 Dolphin Lane, Gulfport  
(on Bayou Bernard off Cowan Road)  
228.896.9182*



story and photo courtesy of  
**Moby Solangi, Director, Institute for Marine Mammal Studies**

Established in 1984, the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies (IMMS) is a premier non-profit organization in the north central Gulf of Mexico dedicated to education, conservation and research on endangered, threatened, and protected marine mammals, sea turtles and their environment.

IMMS makes learning fun and helps promote marine conservation through public awareness with field trips to its Center for Marine Education and Research in Gulfport and through outreach programs that encourage involvement of the community in environmental issues. These efforts ultimately result in good public stewardship of the marine environment and its inhabitants.

Dolphins and sea turtles are considered a sentinel species because they are excellent indicators of ecosystem health. The Mississippi Sound supports one of the largest populations of dolphins in the United States, yet the area has experienced a large number of natural and anthropogenic disturbances that adversely affected the health of marine mammals.

Following the BP oil spill in 2010, damages from these threats have been potentially evidenced by an abnormally high number of dolphin and sea turtle strandings. IMMS is part of the National Marine Stranding Network. By responding to sick and injured marine mammals, our staff is able to rehabilitate the animals and learn from them at the same time.

As a leader in marine mammal and turtle research in the northern Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, IMMS has studied marine mammals and turtles under controlled conditions to learn more about their biology and physiology. Conducting studies in the wild allows researchers to examine population abundance and other ecological parameters such as age, structure and seasonal movements.