

Mallini Bayou Dolphins

In late January 2005, a pod of four dolphins believed to be two adults, one juvenile and a calf traveled into Mallini Bayou in Pass Christian, MS. After entering the convoluted channels of the bayou, most likely in search of fish, the dolphins apparently became trapped. Though there were two possible exits from the bayou, scientists believe that something may have obstructed the route or otherwise discouraged the dolphins from leaving. Local bayou residents reported that it was the first time dolphins had been sighted consistently in the past thirty years. Officials contacted the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies (IMMS) to monitor the pod's condition and plan a possible course of action to help the pod should it become necessary. IMMS' daily monitoring of the bayou's salinity and temperature demonstrated levels that were borderline low for a dolphin. Long term exposure to low salinity often causes skin lesions and other infections in dolphins and other marine mammals.



Although the dolphins were still active and apparently feeding, there was growing concern for their health and food supply. These concerns led IMMS researchers to search for exit routes that the dolphins could use to navigate out of the bayou. Since dolphins are social animals, one concern was that if too much time passed, the animals would lose contact with their larger pod, further complicating interactions between individuals when these four dolphins were finally able to leave the bayou.

Staff members from IMMS explored the exit to the south and found the conditions unfavorable for the dolphins. Combined with the noisy travel of cars crossing an overhead bridge, the shallowness of the water made the southern exit unlikely for the animals to escape without assistance. Researchers then explored the northern exit into St. Louis Bay to check for any obstructions that may have prevented the dolphins from escaping using that route. While no obvious obstacles were noted, researchers hypothesized that this longer and more convoluted route may have played a role in their reluctance to leave the bayou. The dolphins presumably entered the bayou during high tide and the sudden decrease in water levels, along with the difficult exit routes, may have discouraged them from leaving.

What began as a situation of great concern fortunately ended in the best possible scenario for the affected dolphins. After a week of being trapped in the bayou, the tide finally rose high enough for the dolphins to safely return to their familiar habitat. IMMS has received no further reports of dolphin sightings in Mallini Bayou since this unique occurrence.