

Dolphins provide a thrill for beachgoers

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A school of about 25 dolphins played just outside the surf off Arroyo Burro Beach for about five hours Thursday — so close to shore that beachgoers wandered into the sea, just to see if they could play with them.

The dolphin alert was sounded about 9 a.m., when Jane Vogel called the News-Press and shrieked, "They're out there, playing. It is FANTASTIC!"

In several minutes I had the Divers Den on the phone, asking for the loan of underwater photographer Pat Martin — and a wetsuit, mask, fins and snorkel for me.

Within minutes Pat and I met on the beach at Arroyo Burro, where Brown Pelican restaurant manager Bob Bozorgmehr told us the dolphins had been swimming offshore since 8 a.m., moving only about a quarter-mile down the coast and circling back again.

We could see them just down the beach, their black dorsal fins gliding in lazy circles offshore. Some surfers and wetsuit-clad swimmers paddled around in the cold water, waiting patiently for the mammals to travel up the coast again.

Pat studied the situation as a profes-

sional photographer might do, and I tried to restrain myself from jumping into the ocean with my clothes on. I had swum with a school of dolphins 10 years ago. Forty miles from the nearest land in the Caribbean, I had played with dolphins day in and day out, week after week, as a pleasure break during a hunt for a sunken Spanish galleon.

Now, at Arroyo Burro Beach, I was going to get a second chance.

Pat and I waded out through the surf, and in several minutes we were surrounded by dolphins.

They dived and surfaced in front of our noses, their blowholes huffing and puffing each time they came up for air.

With our heads underwater, we could hear them whistling and talking to each other. But we also realized that the water was stirred up and murky. In fact, we couldn't see beyond two feet.

So, even though the animals were swimming within three feet of us — so very, very close — we couldn't see them underwater!

With my head below the surface, all I could see were my hands, and the little baitfishes the dolphins were feeding on. Most of the time I hung on the surface, just watching dorsal fins and blowholes traveling around me in eve-

ry direction.

Before long, Pat and I were joined by another swimmer — a woman who came out wearing only a leotard.

"I was so glad to see you two out here," she said. "It gave me courage to come out. This is WONDERFUL!"

Her name was Marilyn Jorgensen, and she explained that she had taken the day off from her work because she was trying to get over a nasty cold.

"And here I am — out here!" she said. "But I'm not cold, I'm so excited."

The three of us stayed until the dolphins came back again, and Pat took pictures of dorsal fins rising and diving around us. I dunked my head and tried to entice the animals to within underwater viewing range by clucking, whistling and singing the theme from "Lawrence of Arabia."

Nothing seemed to work.

"What happened to that instinctive bond between man and dolphin?" I asked Pat. "Why won't they play with us?"

Later, we realized that if the water had been clearer it would have been a playful time with the dolphins. Pat, too, had dived with the animals in clear, tropical water, and both of us

remembered that because of clear visibility in such waters, a dolphin swimming within three feet allows the eyes of man and animal to meet, and a diver can see the dolphins circle to investigate. At Arroyo Burro, Pat and I could see nothing, and that was the only reason the animals seemed elusive.

Later, Dr. Charles Woodhouse of the Museum of Natural History said the dolphins we were swimming with were a coastal stock of bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus* — or gilli, depending which side of a scientific dispute you take), and that these animals do not normally range north of Palos Verdes Peninsula.

El Nino had brought them here, Dr. Woodhouse said. The dolphins were first sighted in the area on Oct. 18, off Carpinteria, he said, and the farthest north they ranged during the recent warm-water season was Goleta Pier.

Dr. Woodhouse explained that the coastal stock of bottlenose dolphin is so called because it ranges within 100 yards of the shore. A counterpart species ranges farther offshore in deeper water, he said.

The recent El Nino sightings of the species constitute a "county record"

See Page C-2, Col. 1

25 dolphins provide thrill for beachgoers

Continued from Page C-1

because this is the first time the dolphins have been officially recorded in the area, he said. Although the mammals have ranged this far north before, during previous El Ninos, written records were not kept.

Into his logs, Dr. Woodhouse recorded our encounter with the dolphins of Arroyo Burro.

On Thursday afternoon, the sea mammals entertained the diners of the

Brown Pelican restaurant until nearly 2 p.m. Pat and I watched them move up the coast while we compared our impressions, and got ready to leave.

Just then our fellow swimmer, Marilyn Jorgensen, approached. Shivering and wrapped in a beach towel, she was still excited about her swim with the animals, and was grinning from ear to ear.

"I'm not sick anymore," she said. "Really, my congestion is all gone. I'm healed!"