

# Algoa Bay

2018

10th Edition







# January

2018

info@raggycharters.co.za  
073 152 2277



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This adult Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin was part of a large school of around 400 individuals that we encountered near St. Croix Island. This happy fellow breached numerous times in front of our penguin research vessel, Winkle. Raggy Charters, along with the World Cetacean Alliance, run very successful campaigns against the keeping of whales and dolphins in aquaria around the world. If you cannot make a cruise with Raggy Charters, they are often observed from various vantage points along the coast. Shark Rock Pier is a good place to start.

**COVER PHOTO:** Schools of between 50 and 600 Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins are often observed swimming close to the shores of Algoa Bay. Occasionally they breach out of the back of a breaking wave. The cover photograph was taken during the late afternoon off the Alexandria Dunefield, it won the National WESSA/SANParks 90th anniversary competition for best photograph taken in a National Park. Recent research has revealed that around 28 500 Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins make use of Algoa Bay. This is the largest population estimate for this species along the South African coastline. Raggy Charters has been running marine eco tours in Algoa Bay since 1997. Over the years, we have observed schools of between 50 and 600 Bottlenose Dolphins on about 90% of our marine cruises. The percentage of dolphin sightings is increasing annually, which is a good sign, as many other marine species are not doing as well.







# February

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These African penguins were photographed on St. Croix Island on their way to a foraging expedition. Their partners were guarding the recently hatched chicks against marauding gulls and skuas. When purse seine fishing is closed within 20km of the island, the parents travel around 50km in order to bring back food for the chicks. When this ban is not in place, they often travel up to 90km in search of food. The food of choice is anchovy, as these have the highest fat content of any of the bait fish. Prey also includes sardines, red-eye sardines, saury and maasbanker. Squid are sometimes also taken but have a limited nutritional value. Chicks fledge at between 2 and 4 months of age depending on food availability. The longest recorded journey by a St. Croix juvenile was to Ichaboe Island off Namibia, a distance of 1600km! Their diet is different to the adults and they target slower moving fish and fish larvae. Most of them return to the island of the birth by the age of around three years, when they start becoming sexually mature.



Juvenile Cape Anchovies, Algoa Bay

# March

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This school of cape anchovy was observed in April during the start of the "Sardine Run". Although the run is usually associated with sardines that travel up the coast from the Agulhas Bank to Kwazulu-Natal, other migrating baitfish include red-eye sardines, saury, cape silverside and maasbanker. The cape anchovy is a widespread species along the South African and Namibian coastline. They feed on zooplankton, which is prolific in Algoa Bay due to the upwelled nutrients and phytoplankton present. Latest research has revealed that the Algoa Bay population of cape anchovy may be genetically separate from other populations. They are present in the bay throughout the year. Anchovies are an important part of the diet of many fishes, birds and mammals. It therefore seems like such an overexploitation that so much is caught by purse seine vessels and used for domestic animal consumption.





Long-beaked Common Dolphins, Port Elizabeth Beachfront, Algoa Bay



# April

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Witnessing a large school of Long-beaked Common dolphins churning up the water into a white frothing mass is an unforgettable experience. Observing them so close to the shore in Algoa Bay is not a common sighting. They are an offshore species and we often encounter schools of up to 3000 individuals during the sardine run. During April 2017, 37 common dolphins stranded 17km from Sundays River on the beach towards Woody Cape. They seldom venture close to shore and we have never witnessed them in the shore break. Unlike Bottlenose dolphins that are often observed surfing the waves, the common dolphins simply would not know how to deal with breaking waves and end up being pushed to shore. A likely cause of them being so close is if they were chasing baitfish, which were plentiful in the bay at the time. If one individual were stranded, then others would have followed in order to assist. We know that the social bonds are incredibly strong between these animals. This is the fourth mass stranding along this section of beach and has similar features to other stranding hotspots around the world. Initial investigation revealed that all the dolphins were alive when they hit the beach. This eliminates the possibility of them being poisoned by something like Red Tide. This would have led them to be scattered over a much larger area, as it is highly unlikely that they would have all died at the same time.



Bryde's whale lunge feeding, juvenile Cape Gannet, Algoa Bay



# May

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We had been following penguin bait balls all morning, much to the delight of our passengers. We then witnessed a few Bryde's whales getting closer to the action. These whales are very difficult to observe when not feeding, as they make a few blows and then disappear for up to 20 minutes, sometimes never to be seen again. The penguins had managed to encircle a school of anchovies and were working them towards the surface. This also allows cape gannets, various species of terns, cape cormorants and gulls to get in on the action. Without the efforts of the penguins, the bait fish would have been too deep and out of reach. During the day the bait fish are usually around 30 to 40 metres deep. Birds on the bait ball suddenly all flee, a fraction of a second before the massive jaw of the Bryde's whale broke the surface. The juvenile Cape gannet in the photo just managed to evade ending up as part of the meal. The fish are kept in the mouth, while the extended throat grooves are contracted and force the water out through the baleen plates. Sharks and seabirds are often swallowed with the fish by accident.





# June

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This dolphin was part of a school of 400 strong that we first sighted just outside the new port at Coega. We normally do not do afternoon cruises to St. Croix Island, but we had a group of Canadian and American tour operators who were begging to do the cruise. They had all seen our video of dolphins on our Facebook page and just had to see the penguins and dolphins for themselves. We did not see our usual sighting of dolphins at Lover's Lane, St. Croix Island. Our faithful Port Elizabeth cetacean spotters along the beachfront also yielded no sightings. The pressure was on. We decided to head north from St. Croix and eventually got a pod of dolphins in very calm water at sunset. After getting them used to the boat they were soon playing around us.





# July

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These South African fur seals lead a tough existence on Black Rocks, which is part of the Bird Island Group at the Eastern end of Algoa Bay. In 1823 the British Settlers from Deal in Kent, England wiped out almost all the seals on the islands in the bay. The Black Rocks colony was the only one that survived, as the sealers could not land on the rocks; they were too steep and slippery. Violent storms, as seen in the photo, often wash the seals off the rocks and into the jaws of the great white sharks. They are resident around the islands in the winter months. This is also the time when young pups get washed off the island and land up on the adjacent Woody Cape beach. Historically, brown hyena would migrate to the coast at this time of the year, in order to take advantage of these tasty morsels. The 300kg bulls "haul out" onto the island in October and protect their territories until the 75kg females arrive in November.





# August

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This lone Bottlenose dolphin was part of a school of 400 observed during a late afternoon cruise. The water was clear and I could see the animal below the water. Instead of my wide angle lens I had the zoom on the camera, not a good choice for dolphins when are that close. I zoomed out as much as I could and looked over the top of the camera. Trying to photograph fast moving dolphins in low light while looking through the viewfinder is nearly impossible. This technique takes quite a while to perfect, but once you have it, there is no going back! The reflections are also much clearer in low light or overcast conditions. It always amazes me how much interest people show towards bottlenose dolphins rather than other cetaceans. Passengers often want to move on after spending time with other cetaceans, but always complain after our 20 minutes of permit allocated time is up with the bottlenose dolphins. It is almost as if they are trying to communicate with the guests in some way. They definitely can see us clearly, as they are capable of changing the shape of these lens and thus able to focus their eyes out of the water.



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Southern Right Whale with White Calf, North End, Algoa Bay

Sybil Edwards



# September

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Fewer and fewer Southern right whales are being observed in Algoa Bay during the past few seasons. Scientists are still trying to work out the reasons for this trend as it does not seem to be the case that the population is decreasing. It is exactly the opposite; populations are increasing by 7% per annum. This white calf and his mother were observed off North End in Port Elizabeth during September. About 3% of calves are born white, except for the dark band behind the head and an occasional black spot. Nearly all white calves are males. As they grow into adults they become greyer and are known as brindled. This calf was probably a few months old. Calves grow extremely fast, while being fed a few hundred litres of its mother's milk per day. Cetacean milk has a much higher fat content than other mammals. It seems that calves start leaving our coastline when they are about eight metres in length. Hopefully they will be big and strong enough to survive the 2000km swim back to their feeding grounds at about 50 to 55 degrees south. Killer whales and ship strikes are some of the perils on the long journey. They take up a swimming position just behind the mother in order to reduce drag.





# October

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This female Humpback whale performed a record number of breaches in front of our spellbound passengers. It did as many as 20 in a row while its calf swam around our boat. This was during September at the start of the Southern migration. The Northern migration passes Algoa Bay at the beginning of June and can last until the end of August. The whale in the photograph is looking a lot thinner than during the Northern migration. This is not surprising as they generally do not eat during the migration and can lose up to half their body mass. This is not always the case, as in 2016 super pods of Humpbacks were observed feeding on krill off the West Coast. The females are the first to pass our bay, usually on their own or in pairs. They are followed a little later by males who tend to move in groups of between four and eight individuals. They are much more aggressive than the females and can be quite intimidating when they have your boat surrounded. The best course of action is to remain still and calm with the outboards running so they always know your position.





# November

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We have called this part of St. Croix Island "Lovers Lane", as this is where mating is observed on a regular basis. It seems as if they feel safe against the side of the island. Only one third of a pod of dolphins is observed at the surface of the water at any time, while the others are on the watch for predators below. The primary reason why dolphins form such large pods is for safety. Prior to the fur seals being eradicated on St. Croix Island in 1823 by the British Settlers, there must have been many great white sharks around the island. In my 20 years of running tours to St. Croix Island I have never seen a single one, although I have seen plenty at Bird Island where there is still a large colony of seals. I have also never seen dolphins close to islands that are inhabited by seals, presumably because of the presence of great white sharks. Although influenced by man, St. Croix is very unique in this regard and should be treasured as such.





# December

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This was a day to remember like no other! We had to go and fetch some of my wife's students who were busy with African penguin research on Bird Island. We decided to make a day of it and invited some of our sponsors and friends along on the cruise. We picked up the students and headed straight for Woody Cape, the Eastern end of Algoa Bay. We immediately caught up with a school of around 200 Bottlenose dolphins and took some great photos with the cape and its coastal forest as a backdrop. We saw another three schools of Bottlenose dolphins along this 40km stretch of sandy beach. The tall sand dunes of the Alexandria Dunefield make the most amazing backdrop to an already incredible photo. As can be seen, there was a large swell running on the day. The immense power of the waves was in stark contrast the seemingly effortless ease with which the dolphins surf them in towards shore and then pop out the rear, just as they were about the break.



This year the Baywatch calendar is promoting the species diversity of Algoa Bay. Algoa Bay was included as one of the South Africa's "Hope Spots" in 2014, due to the bay's natural beauty and incredible biodiversity. In 2016 it was titled the "Bottlenose Dolphin Capital of the World". Plans are also afoot to hold a Dolphin Carnival along the Port Elizabeth Beachfront in 2018. This promotes the main objective of the Baywatch Marine Conservation Project (est.1992) to educate the community and especially the youth about the marine environment and the need for its protection and conservation. The 2018 calendar is the tenth edition using photographs taken by Lloyd Edwards during his marine eco cruises in Algoa Bay. Funds generated go towards the Penguin Research Fund and Dr. Lorien Pichegru who is conducting vital penguin research on St. Croix Island to help reverse the trend that has seen the penguin population decrease by 70% in the last ten years.

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