

Dolphins On Duty

The U.S. Navy trains these supersmart animals to work on lifesaving missions.

A dolphin in training off the coast of Hawaii

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ONLINE!

Find out why dolphins are so amazing!

AS YOU READ

Think about why dolphins were chosen to help the Navy. What qualities do they have that make them a good choice?

In April, a fishing boat was bobbing along in the Arctic Ocean. It was sailing near the coast of Norway, a country in Europe. Then, a fisherman on the boat spotted a beluga whale. The whale was wearing clips that hold a camera. Why would a whale need a camera? Could the animal be a spy?

The answer just might be yes! The whale also had clips on its

harness with the words “St. Petersburg.” That’s the name of a city in Russia. Officials say this means the whale was likely trained by the Russian military as a spy.

This may seem a bit fishy. But



whales, dolphins, and other marine mammals are used to help militaries around the world. That includes the United States military. The U.S. Navy Marine Mammal Program currently has more than 100 sea animals. They protect our country from underwater threats.

The Best of the Best

The Navy program started in 1959. The Navy tested out more

than a dozen animals in the early years. These included sharks, sea turtles, and birds. Today the Navy uses bottlenose dolphins and California sea lions.

“The Navy’s dolphins and sea lions perform missions that the Navy cannot yet accomplish in any other way,” says Mark Xitco. He’s the director of the program.

Both animals are very smart and easy to train. And both can quickly **adapt** to different environments. These include shallow waters and deep seas.

But there are more dolphins in the program because they use echolocation. That means they use sound to “see” underwater!

On the Job

Navy dolphins live at the Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego, California. They begin training when they’re a few years old. Handlers show them how to look for underwater explosives called mines. The dolphins can then mark the mines’ location. Mines could hurt or kill people on military ships. And mines can be difficult for humans to **detect**.

Animals Undercover

Check out these other unlikely animals that have been used as spies.



Bomb-Sniffing Bees

Bees have a great sense of smell. Since 1999, the U.S. military has trained them to sniff out chemicals in bombs.



Private Pigeon

The U.S. government created a camera small enough for pigeons to carry. But details of how—or when—these cameras were used are top secret.



Suspicious Squirrels

In 2007, 14 squirrels were arrested in Iran for using sensors to spy on the country. But many think this story is nuts.

But it’s no problem for dolphins. The animals can easily see through dark, muddy waters using echolocation. Plus, they can dive hundreds of feet below the surface. That’s much farther than humans can dive. Trainers also teach dolphins to identify enemy swimmers.

“The animals are natural hunters,” says Xitco. “We just change what they learn to hunt for.”

Reporting for Duty

In the past 40 years, Navy-trained animals have traveled a lot. They’ve been to

the coasts of more than a dozen countries on official missions. But the dolphins keep busy even when they aren’t on a mission. They help with security at Navy bases around the world. Or they prepare for future jobs.

“They will be ready if they are needed,” says Xitco. “Navy dolphins and sea lions are always on duty.”

—by Tricia Culligan

WORDS TO KNOW

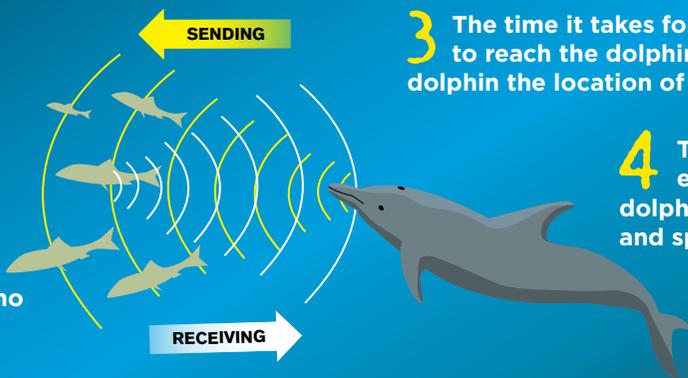
adapt verb. adjust to new conditions or situations
detect verb. notice or discover

HOW IT WORKS Echolocation

Seeing With Sound

1 A dolphin squeaks, sending out sound waves through the water.

2 The waves bounce off an object and echo back to the dolphin.



3 The time it takes for the echo to reach the dolphin tells the dolphin the location of the object.

4 The way the sound echoes tells the dolphin the shape, size, and speed of the object.