



Day of the Dolphins

When a Cornish beauty spot became a killing ground, locals dropped everything to save the stranded dolphins

BY JOHN DYSON

Swinging chainsaws and helmets, Conrad Birne and Seth Neill strode down a woodland track. Through sun-dappled leaves the tree surgeons glimpsed Porth Creek, an inlet off the Percuil River near St Mawes, Cornwall. And they noticed something odd—no birds were singing.

At the water's edge an object floating in tangy seaweed caught Birne's eye. At first he thought it was a log. Then he looked along the creek and turned pale. He grabbed his mobile and dialled the Coast Guard.

The call, at 8.30am on Monday, June 9, last year, triggered a wave of activity as volunteers were paged. Jenny Haley was just starting work as a veterinary nurse in Newquay; her colleague Leanne Birtles had just done a night shift. They pulled on wetsuits and ran to Haley's car. In the cottage where she ran a wildlife hospital, Caroline Curtis checked her animals had food and water then headed for Porth Creek. Vet Darryl Thorpe, walking his whippet in a field near Looe, grabbed his bag. In Hayle, quantity surveyor Dave Jarvis and his wife Lesley plunged into the rush-hour traffic.

First to arrive was Debs Wallis who worked in The Plume of Feathers in Portscatho, just over the hill. The inshore lifeboat of the RNLI that sped from Falmouth met her on the shore.

Everywhere they looked were dead dolphins, floating on their sides, flippers in the air, or drifting belly-up, their fins bumping the mud below. In all they counted 24 bodies. "What can have happened?" Wallis gasped.

The day before, she'd seen a big pod of dolphins dancing in the water, clicking loudly. She followed them in her kayak. Out at sea there had been naval ships and helicopters.

Down the creek, four dolphins floundered in barely a foot of water. Every twitch of their tails only drove them further into the shallows. Maybe dolphins can't do backwards, Debs Wallis thought. Jumping into the water, she hugged the nearest animal, turned it round and gave it a push. After a moment's thought it swam off. She turned the others and they followed.

The people paged by phone began to arrive, all volunteer trained medics of British Divers Marine Mammal Rescue, a nationwide charity set up in 1988. Six adult dolphins and a young one swam in tight circles out in the channel. Three stranded on the mud were still alive. Caroline Curtis, a forceful character with a mane of blonde curls, spelled it out: "We've got to get the dead ones out of the way, then herd the living down to the sea. There's not much time: the tide's falling."

Conrad Birne exchanged his heavy work trousers for khaki shorts. It was his daughter Neve's sixth birthday and he'd promised to be home for it, but this was more important.

On the creek's bank, two dolphins half out of the water were beached five feet apart. Birne squatted in the mud, massaging one of the dolphins and talking to it. He held its beak to keep its head above water so it could breathe. Occasionally it gave a mournful click.

Dolphins are not accustomed to their own body weight, as it's normally supported by water. Beached, they can suffer damage to internal organs. Sean Langton, a local vet, checked the animal's heart rate and found its breathing was compromised, perhaps from being on the mud for so long. It was suffering and clearly wouldn't survive. He put it to sleep with an injection.

The other dolphin's plaintive calls to its dead companion came slower. Getting no response, it tried to look round. A tear rolled down the cheek of the burly lifeboatman holding it. The second dolphin was covered with a wet sheet and a towel: if the skin dried it would peel. "This one will make it," Langton said.

Across the river, 29-year-old Jenny Haley fell on her knees in the mud beside the third of the dolphins that had been stranded there. She lifted its head on to her lap. "You'll be fine now, Lady," she crooned. The dolphin clicked soulfully. Its breathing had gone from about five breaths a minute to 15, a clear sign of distress.

Leanne Birtles, 25, pushed seaweed under the dolphin's belly to make a cushion. She kept its skin wet with water and made a "dam" of K-Y Jelly around the blowhole to keep water out. Tree surgeon Seth Neill propped up some tarpaulin on sticks to provide shade. Vet Darryl Thorpe assessed the animal. "This one's a viable refloat," he decided. "We can give it a go."

He thought the smiling vet nurse was doing a good job—rescuers in New Zealand have found that cetaceans often respond better to women.

The team had brought their "ambulance", a trailer filled with equipment kept at a fire station. Each dolphin was rolled sideways and a mat slid under

Early in the afternoon each of the two bright yellow mats holding the surviving dolphins was clipped to an air-filled tube and hitched to the side of an inflatable boat. One boat was driven by Mark Bowen, 42, who rented kayaks to visitors in St Mawes; the other by Iain Webb, who ran a



Dead dolphins drift among the seaweed in Porth Creek, Cornwall; (right) a dying dolphin is checked for signs of life by rescuers

MARY ALICE POLLARD/JUSTICEPHOTOS

it; then helpers gripped the edges and carried it into the water.

Haley and her team rocked Lady in the water to help restore her equilibrium. Her joints would be stiff after being out of the water so long and her internal organs displaced. They released the head so she could breathe. The first two times it went under, but the third time she held it up herself. "She'll be fine now," said Curtis. Meanwhile, on the bank, coastguards were dragging dead dolphins from the water.

boatyard up the river. They moved cautiously ahead.

"Slow down, Lady's getting swamped," warned Haley. "I'm already at tick-over," replied Bowen. But he slowed down by clicking the outboard motor in and out of gear. With water flowing over her back, the dolphin grew calmer.

But there was a problem. The seven free-swimming dolphins milling around in the middle of the narrow channel didn't want to follow. Then Curtis had a brainwave: "Let's turn the boat so

Lady's facing them." As the pontoon turned in the water the dolphin clicked more loudly. "I'm here, I'm OK," she seemed to say.

"It's working!" said Haley. The seven dolphins swam across the front of the pontoon as if checking her out. Lady got more vocal, clicking fast and

in the pontoons thrashed fretfully. The seven free ones scattered and went back to where they started.

Finally the pilot got the message and moved off. Now the whole operation had to start again. People in boats circled behind the dolphins and slapped the water with oars. "Don't just film

Four hotel cooks paddled in kayaks in the shallows to help nudge them forward. The big pod moved out and mingled with the other seven.

Crowds lined the waterfront of St Mawes to watch the convoy move through the moored yachts into open water. One bigger dolphin moved ahead

of the others, leading the way. Out in the main part of the harbour the dolphins got excited. Their whole mood changed. "They're getting stronger," said Thorpe. "I think they're smelling the sea."

"You can see they're happy," said Haley, who was grinning too.

All the dolphins now swam strongly. Little ones started leaping and waving their tails, happy and exuberant as usual. The two in the pontoons breathed more steadily.

Then the magic moment: the boats with the pontoons drew together and stopped. Thorpe worried about releasing the dolphins. On land they can suffer the equivalent of seasickness and become disorientated. If Lady tipped over in the water she'd sink and there'd be nothing they could do. The air was let out of one side of the pontoon so Lady was lowered into the water. With a thrust of her tail she was gone. A moment later the other dolphin followed. Far ahead, dolphins leapt exuberantly out of the water.

Back at Porth Creek the sense of triumph was tempered by the sight of dead dolphins laid in rows. Scientists who had dashed from the Institute of Zoology in London were already conducting post-mortems.

That day more dolphins were steered to safety at Falmouth and Gillan; one died at Trelissick. The causes of the mass stranding remain unknown. Locals held the naval exercises responsible—US government investigations into similar strandings have blamed naval sonar. The Royal Navy had warned of sonar activity that day but later cancelled its exercise. It said in a statement: "It is very unlikely that any naval activity could have affected these dolphins in any way."

The rescue had involved 56 volunteer medics and scores of other helpers. When Conrad Birne got home the birthday party was long over and Neve was in bed, but happy. "Don't worry, Daddy," she said. "I saw you on the telly." n



Jenny Hayley (sitting) and helpers shade Lady from the sun (left); with Lady carried in the yellow pontoon, rescuers guide dolphins out to sea



whistling. Then the seven circled and followed. "They're coming with us, keep going!" Haley urged.

The two inflatables picked up speed and moved downriver with the seven free dolphins circling between them and a handful of boats behind as a barricade. All was going perfectly. Then they heard a roar in the sky. A small blue helicopter came in fast and hovered over them. Water frothed in its downdraught; the noise was painful.

People waved desperately, but the pilot took no notice. The two dolphins

us," someone told a BBC news crew, "help us." And they did.

Again, Lady was put in position to call the other dolphins. At first they didn't respond but gradually they inched down the channel. In the Percuil River the pace picked up. In the deeper, clearer water the dolphins stopped lolling anxiously and swam with more determination. Around the next headland the rescuers saw a mass of curved black triangles cutting the water. "More dolphins!" Haley said. "There must be 50 at least."

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"Just our luck—vegetarians!"