

# Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

March 2014



## Another Link Between U.S. and Cuban Anglers

We may not have diplomatic ties with Cuba, but we sure have fishery connections. A third recovery of a dolphin tagged off the U.S. East Coast has been reported from Cuba's north shore. This follows the previous recoveries of two dolphinfish tagged off Islamorada, Florida, being reported from Cuba's Atlantic coast.

The most recent recovery was a fish tagged by Rick Thomas off Miami, Florida, while working aboard the charter boat *Thomas Flyer*. Thomas tagged the fish estimated to be 18 inches in fork length on August 2, 2013. On January 8, 2014, 159 days later, the fish was recaptured by Andro Romero Alonso of Baracoa, Guantanamo, Cuba. It was recovered off Bahia de Baracoa on the northeastern tip of Cuba during a fishing trip aboard the private boat *Lucero NC5177*. The fish was reported to be 35.4 inches in length and weigh 10 pounds at recapture. If the fish took the short route to Cuba, traveling from Miami through the Providence Channel to the Atlantic Ocean where it hooked southward down to and around Grand Turk, Bahamas, before turning west to Cuba, the fish would have traveled more than 900 miles. This would require the fish to average traveling 6.0 miles per day. If the fish traveled the more frequently used route up the Eastern Seaboard to Atlantis Canyon before turning southeast to loop around Bermuda and the southeastern tip of the Bahamas where it turned west toward Cuba, it would have traveled more than 3,000 miles, moving an average of 20 miles per day.

At liberty for 5.25 months, this is the shortest travel time for a fish recovered off Cuba. The fish recovered in 2006 off Bahia de Gibara on the northeastern coast was at liberty for 8.25 months, while the 2009 fish recovered off the northwestern coast near Havana had been at liberty for 7.5 months.



*Three tagged dolphin from the east coast of Florida have been recovered off the northern coast of Cuba. The most recent was found off the northeastern tip of Cuba in January of 2014 while the others (denoted by yellow stars) were recovered in 2006 and 2009. Depending on route used, these fish traveled from 900 to more than 3,000 miles.*

While there is no way of knowing the exact route that each of these fish used, it is likely that it was one of the routes shown in the preceding figure or somewhere in between. The long liberty periods of each fish would suggest that they covered a distance greater than 1,000 or 1,500 miles during their freedom. When you consider that the fish most recently recovered (159 days of liberty) would have needed to travel at the rate of just over 0.25 mile per hour to complete the trip, and that dolphins have been documented traveling at sustained speeds of 15 times greater than this rate, it is well within reason that these fish traveled greater distances.

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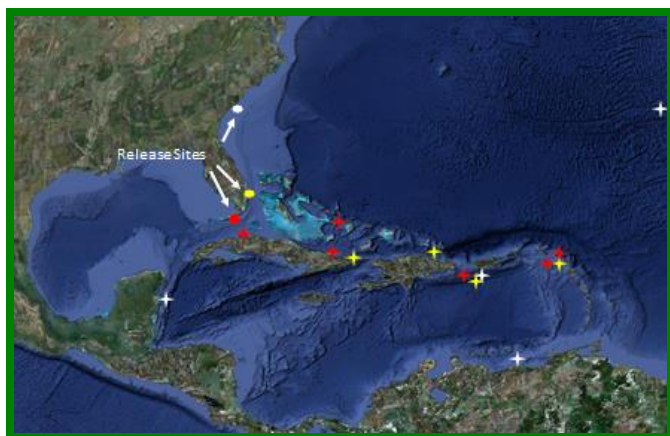


## Dolphinfish Research Newsletter

March 2014

Page 2.

Each of these Cuban recaptures was tagged off south Florida or the Keys, which raises the question whether it is it a coincidence or a developing pattern. It has largely been Florida fish that have shown up in the Caribbean Sea from the West Indies, through the Virgin Islands and the Greater Antilles. However, the fact that more than 60 percent of the fish tagged throughout this study have been off Florida's east coast must be considered. This, coupled with the fact that 18 percent of dolphin tagged in the study were off South Carolina and these fish have been found in the Caribbean off Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Mexico, changes the view of the relationship between east Florida dolphin and those in the Caribbean. Three times as many Florida fish (nine) as fish from South Carolina (three) have been recovered in the Caribbean Sea or off the islands forming its boundary. This closely follows the relationship of the number of fish tagged off the two areas, 60 percent to 18 percent. Recognizing that the tropical recoveries of fish from these two areas follow the same proportion as the number of fish tagged, it appears to be a function of the number of fish tagged in these areas, rather than where they were tagged geographically.



Twelve dolphinfish tagged off the U.S. East Coast have been recovered in the Caribbean Sea or off the islands bounding it. Stars denote recovery points and their color reflects the geographical release site.

This does not discount the possibility that there could be a sub-population of dolphin occurring off south Florida that restrict their movements to the areas around south Florida, the Bahamas and Caribbean rather than riding the prevailing ocean currents northward along the U.S. East Coast. It will likely take an in-depth genetic study to answer this question.

The Dolphinfish Research Program needs your financial support. No federal funds support this important research. This program exists because of private donations.

## Satellite Tags Deployed in the Caribbean Sea

Talk about somebody with a good-luck horseshoe, that would be Wess Merten, a PhD candidate at the University of Puerto Rico who works with the DRP heading up the Caribbean phase of the research. Wess should have bought a lottery ticket on January 31, 2014, because he will likely never see his luck being any greater than it was that day.

He is scheduled to deploy three satellite tags off Puerto Rico this winter, two in the Caribbean and one off the north coast. The size of the tag necessitates that a large specimen, preferably 25 pounds or greater, be used, and because only two cow dolphin have carried a satellite tag, at least one of the instruments should go on a female. But female dolphin of this size are very rare. The perfect day in deploying sat tags would be to put one on a large bull and one on a cow, but that had never happened.

On the last day of January this year, Wess set out from La Parguera, located on the south coast, aboard the UPR vessel *Tiburón* along with Capt. Milton Carlo and angler Anibal Santiago in hopes of tagging a few dolphin and possibly deploying one of the pricey instruments. The dolphin fishing had been slow, so they were just hoping to get some conventional streamer tags in a few fish.



The first fish of the day turned out to be this 51-inch (45-pound) bull dolphin that was fitted with a high resolution sat tag set to pop off, surface, and start downloading its data on March 2, 2014. Photo by W. Merten.

With seas running seven feet, fishing was not comfortable but the conditions were right for catching dolphin. They were roughly 17 miles off La Parguera when they got their first solid hookup of the day. As soon as the fish felt the hook, it went airborne and Wess realized they had a potential candidate for a satellite tag. We always say a fish is a potential candidate because it must be in good condition when it is brought to the boat and it cannot be deeply hooked or bleeding. The bull turned out to be in great condition and was quickly but carefully fitted with one of the \$4,200 instruments prior to its release.

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# Dolphinfish Research Newsletter

March 2014

Page 3.

After releasing the bull dolphin, the *Tiburón's* crew experienced a common frustration suffered by many anglers: they kept seeing schools of large dolphin but they could not get one to take a bait. The dolphin seemed to be fixated on eating flying fish. Two hours later and a little more than four miles farther out, they finally got a solid hookup on another fish. Surprisingly, it was a large female dolphin, 47.5 inches FL, that came to the boat in good condition and left sporting an expensive new piece of bling.

What a day for dolphinfish research! Not only were two sat tags deployed but we have the opportunity to compare the movements and behavior of adults of both sexes at the same time in the same area. It does not get any better than that for a biologist.

Wess should have bought a lottery ticket.

## 2013 Annual Results Summary Posted

The results of the tagging effort by all of the boats and anglers who participated in the 2013 research effort has been finalized and posted on the "Results" page of the DRP. A map shows the recaptures reported in 2013, along with an accompanying table that gives the specific information about who, when, and where for each fish recaptured.

Visit <http://dolphintagging.com/> and go to the Study Results page and the Map of Recaptures page to learn more about the 2013 program.

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