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THE POD

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PHOTOSTORY

My First Encounter with Pygmy Killer Whales: A Swim to Remember

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The Lakshadweep Islands and their surrounding waters host one of the most diverse marine ecosystems in India. As a coral reef researcher, I first began visiting Lakshadweep in 2019, primarily to study corals. Over time, I have spent countless hours observing coral reefs, reef fishes, and the fascinating interactions among different reef inhabitants.

Later, in 2023, I joined the marine mammal survey team at ICAR-CMFRI and began conducting surveys mainly in mainland Indian waters. In April 2024, we planned to conduct a marine mammal survey in the waters of Lakshadweep. Being in the open ocean, these waters offer a high chance of encountering both common and rare marine mammal species. Our first survey of the northern islands of Lakshadweep was conducted in May 2024, followed by another survey covering the southern islands in February 2025.

During the second survey, while sailing from Kalpeni to Kavaratti, as we continued scanning the water, the crew encountered pygmy killer whales for the first time. With the initial cues, Utthamapandian, one of the crew members, suddenly pointed into the distance and shouted, “Dolphins, dolphins!” At first, it was just a dark shape breaking the surface of the water, followed by another and then several more. Within seconds, it became clear that a pod of large dolphins was approaching the boat. As we moved closer, we realized that the species was pygmy killer whales.

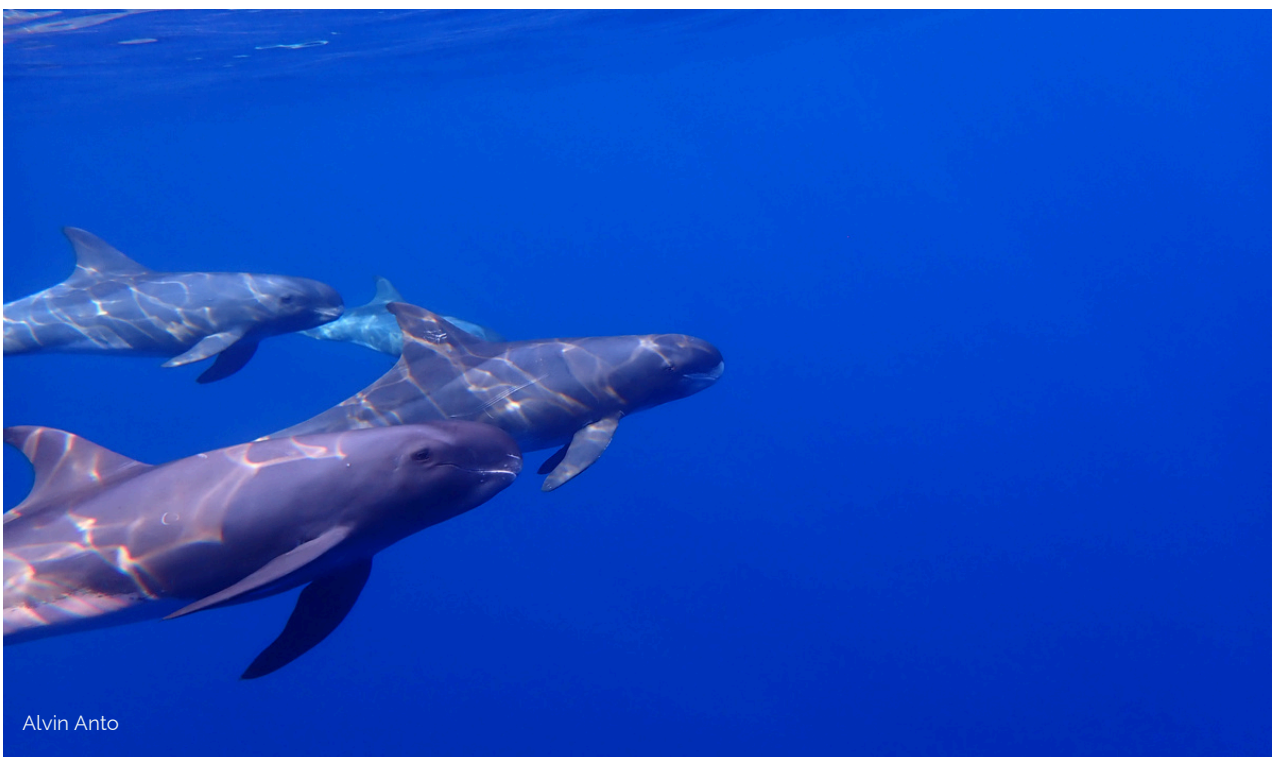


Alvin Anto

My first glance of the Pygmy killer whale pod almost 20m away.

The pod appeared curious about our vessel. Several individuals surfaced nearby, their dorsal fins slicing through the water as they moved gracefully alongside us. This was my first time seeing these understudied and rarely encountered oceanic dolphins. Though this smallest group of cetaceans carries “Whale” in their name, they belong to the family Delphinidae, the group comprises dolphins. Watching them from the deck was already thrilling, but what made the experience truly unforgettable was what happened next.

I had always felt the urge to enter the water and observe these majestic marine mammals up close. As the animals continued bow-riding in front of the vessel for a long time, the sight had me curious to jump into the water to observe and photograph them underwater. At first, I hesitated because we were in the open ocean, at a depth of approximately 1250-2000 meters. I was unsure whether it was wise to jump into the water; would the dolphins stay with the boat or swim away?



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Four individuals approaching from the starboard side of the boat

After observing their behavior for a while and making sure the animals appeared calm and undisturbed, I finally decided to enter the water. I put on my snorkel gear and jumped in, holding onto a rope tied to the front of the boat to keep myself steady as the boat moved. I was on the starboard side of the vessel, and I soon adjusted to the boat's movement. With one hand, I held onto the rope, and with the other, I held my underwater camera.

At first, I couldn't see the cetaceans, but soon I spotted four or five of them about 20 meters ahead of the boat and me. A few minutes later, four individuals swam in from the port side of the vessel, moving parallel to me. This was my first encounter up close, and they passed by only about a meter away from me.



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A closer look at the pod with white lipstick-like patch clearly visible.

I was taking the images without even looking through the camera; the pod stole my entire focus. Their behavior appeared relaxed and inquisitive, as if they were watching us just as much as we were watching them. One of the first interesting details I noticed was the white coloration around their lips and at the tip of the snout, giving the appearance of a white lipstick-like patch. From underwater, I could see details that are difficult to observe from a boat, the sleek body shape, the powerful tail strokes, the red-colored eyeballs, and the calm, deliberate way they moved through the water.

The encounter lasted for around fifteen minutes. Eventually, I decided it was time to get back to the vessel.



The pod swimming ahead

Although the dolphins appeared calm and uninterested in us, a thought lingered in the back of my mind: they may be called pygmy killer whales, but they are still killer whales. I signalled to the team on board and slowly made my way back, pulling myself aboard.

As I sat there catching my breath, I kept thinking about the moment when I decided to enter the water. It was a decision that involved a certain amount of risk, especially in the vast open ocean. Yet that single decision had given me one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. Encounters with pygmy killer whales are rare in the wild, and the opportunity to observe them so closely, let alone swim alongside them, is something very few people ever experience. At that moment, I felt incredibly fortunate, knowing that I had just shared a brief but unforgettable moment with one of the ocean's most elusive species of marine mammals.

As part of a central government research institute, we had the necessary permissions, scientific wherewithal and training to conduct research and approach marine mammals. Kindly note that entering the water or approaching dolphins and whales may lead to harassment, which violates the Wildlife Protection Act (1972).

The authors and The Pod do not encourage swimming alongside/entering the water with wild marine mammals, as it can be dangerous and harmful to both animals and humans.