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**Media Release**

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**UP researchers spot killer whales killing a dolphin**

Dolphin researchers in Namibia have for the first time seen killer whales in Walvis Bay attacking and killing a Heaviside’s dolphin.

On 10 March, the Namibian Dolphin Project (NDP) team, consisting of research technician Francis “Jelly” Gelletich, field officer Jessica Toms, and University of Pretoria PhD student Morgan Martin, were conducting a beach survey in Walvis Bay when they saw the distinctive large dorsal fin of a killer whale. Killer whales are known to be infrequent visitors to this coastline. They mobilised immediately and were able to launch their boat 45 minutes later, finding the whales – an adult male and a smaller animal, probably female – 30 minutes later with the help of a local tour boat. There were also several Cape fur seals and a group of Heaviside’s dolphins nearby.

Very suddenly, the team spotted a very quick rush at the surface back and forth. The larger killer whale lifted his body out of the water and revealed an adult-sized Heaviside’s dolphin in his mouth.

Both killer whales submerged briefly then a few seconds later the dolphin leaped out of the water whereafter the smaller killer whale charged into it from below knocking it down beside her.

“We could see that the Heaviside’s dolphin was bleeding but there was no further struggle and the killer whales dove underwater taking their prey with them,” said Martin. “The killer whales were submerged for around three minutes and the Heaviside’s dolphin was not seen again.”

After this the killer whales remained submerged for around 4 minutes and then resurfaced among a group of seals feeding about 50 m from the vessel. Surface rushes were seen again but no animals were thrown into the air. At this point the group of seals became very agitated diving in unison and closely bunched together. The killer whales then started to remain submerged for increasingly longer periods, while the sea progressively grew rougher and so the team decided to call it a day.

The following evening, a heavily mutilated, freshly dead carcass of a Heaviside’s dolphin was reported on a nearby beach through the local strandings network. It was confirmed by photos that the carcass belonged to an adult Heaviside’s dolphin. The NDP responded to the call but the carcass could not be found and is thought to have washed out to sea.

Heaviside’s dolphins have a very similar colouration to killer whales and are frequently mistaken for ‘baby killer whales’ when first seen. Some research suggests that this colouration (especially the ‘trident’ of white on the belly) may act as a form of mimicry which would put off predatory sharks. Clearly it doesn’t fool killer whales.

Heaviside’s dolphins are among a group of dolphins and toothed whales which are thought to have evolved to echolocate and communicate with only ultra-high frequency sounds as a way of avoiding being heard by killer whales, which often locate their prey by eavesdropping on them underwater.

Killer whales are known to eat a wide range of animals in Namibia and Southern Africa including fish, cephalopods (squid, etc.), seabirds, seals, turtles, small whales and dolphins. There is only one previous report of them eating a Heaviside’s dolphin in Namibia, but no photographs are available of that incident.

The Namibian Dolphin Project is a research, conservation and education initiative which has collected data on whales, dolphins and turtles since 2008. Simon Elwen, a research fellow at the Mammal Research Institute at the University of Pretoria, is the project’s director.

*Photos and video of the incident are available from Caters News:* [*info@catersnews.com*](mailto:info@catersnews.com)*or call*[*+44 121 616 1100*](tel:+44%20121%20616%201100)*/*[*+1 646 380 1615*](tel:+1%20646-380-1615)*.*

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