

Three people rescue dolphin entangled in crab net in river

By Polly Powers Stramm (Savannah Morning News)

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A dolphin trapped in the Savannah River channel recently was rescued from near death, thanks to the collective efforts of a concerned Tybee Island marina owner and a couple of other courageous individuals and agencies.

The dramatic saga began when self-described marine lover Mike Scarbrough, owner of the Lazaretto Creek Marina, heard an urgent message crackling through over his radio.

"I heard a call to the Coast Guard from (dredge workers) saying that they had spotted a dolphin hung up in a crab trap in the channel," he said. The Coast Guard responded that they would contact Coastal Resources in Brunswick.

Scarbrough, concerned the dolphin would be dead before help came from Brunswick, called the Coast Guard and said he would attempt the rescue.

It was about 11 a.m. and because of the dense fog, "visibility was about zero in the channel," Scarbrough said. "I called Mike Ward (project manager for Weeks Dredging) and asked if he would help. Within just a short while, he arrived with a helper and we set out to find the dolphin."

Because of the fog, the trio had to almost feel their way out to the channel, where the search got underway. They found the dolphin, which was tangled in a crab trap ropes. Scarbrough said, "The tide was coming in and the dolphin was able to just barely stick its head up to get a breath. It was exhausted."

The swift tide made it difficult for the rescue team to get into position to snag the float attached to the trap and the distressed dolphin, which weighed approximately 300 pounds, Scarbrough said. Finally, the men were in a position to hook the float.

"We wrestled the entangled mess to the boat," Scarbrough said. "I reached down and grabbed the dolphin's tail. A dolphin that size could have pulled all of us, including the boat, but it did not have enough (strength) left to pull against me," he added. "As I held the tail, we saw the knotted mess. We saw cuts in the dolphin's skin where it had pulled so hard."

Then, the trio's worst fear happened – an outbound ship near Fort Jackson headed straight towards the group.

"I called the Coast Guard and asked them to inform the ship that we were in the middle of the channel rescuing a dolphin," Scarbrough said. "It would have been

tragic to go through what we did to free the dolphin just to have it run over by a ship."

Finally, the lines were cut and the dolphin was freed. For about an hour the dolphin floated on its side while the men watched. "We stayed with it, looking for a spark of life and hoping for the best."

Gradually, the dolphin began floating upright instead of on its side. IT went under for about two seconds, then up and down for four seconds.

"Each dive took a little longer than the last," Scarbrough said. "After 15 minutes, it went down seemingly as a normal dive and back to the top. ON the last dive, we thought the dolphin had recovered and left. Then, to our amazement, the dolphin came up at the back of the boat with its head out of the water as if to say 'thanks'," he added. "We looked at each other with a 'did-you-see-that look' and the dolphin swam off into the fog."

The men stood there for a minute, not saying a word.

"We all three live by the sea," Scarbrough said. "And we are all respectful and thankful for all she has given us. There is no greater feeling than to give her back something as beautiful as a dolphin."

A letter of thanks from a local resident in response to this story:

May 1, 2001

Dear Mr. Scarbrough,

A couple of weeks ago, I read about your successful efforts to free a dolphin that was trapped in a crab net in the Savannah River.

I really have no reason to write to you, and I certainly have nothing profound to say. Too bad I'm not rich (I don't think that I'm even considered solvent), or else I'd write a big fat check to go along with the big fat thank you, a thank you that I am able to give you, for taking the time and initiative to do what you did for that dolphin.

Everyone is always speaking of that mythical corner of Heaven that is always being set aside for people for various reasons. Well, I think God needs to start evicting people, because that corner is all yours.

I have no compelling personal attachment to that - or any - dolphin. But you can't have grown up in this area without acquiring a soft spot in your heart and soul in regards to them.

Your actions that day helped that dolphin. But it also helped me just by knowing that there are people in the town like you. And I am not forgetting about Mike Ward and his helper, either.

The three of you are what heroes are all about.

On behalf of myself, that dolphin, and all of Savannah, Thank You!

Jim Crovatt
Savannah, GA