

Dolphins follow warm current for surprise visit to Santa Cruz

SANTA CRUZ — Dolphins were sighted in Santa Cruz Saturday, and they weren't from Miami on their way to play the 49ers.

Instead — in another unusual occurrence believed to be caused by the warm ocean current known as El Nino — a school of at least seven dolphins cavorted just offshore of West Cliff Drive for several hours Saturday morning.

The dolphins stayed between Lighthouse Point and Municipal Wharf about 30 yards off shore, and caused quite a stir from on-lookers. They paddled to within a few feet of the shore.

Randy Wells, a dolphin biologist at the UCSC's Long Marine Laboratory, said that dolphins are usually warm water species. "They've been quite a few sightings to shore," he said, although none so close.

"To tell you the truth, I thought they were sharks at first," said Chris Thomas, who watched from West Cliff Drive. "They were circling around a rubber dinghy and I thought the people were in trouble."

"It's just amazing," he added. "I've never seen dolphins before."

Evelyn Ellyn said she was "surprised, but delighted" to see the dolphins. "I love it. It's my dream. I never thought I would see dolphins in Santa Cruz."

Ellyn added that her husband grabbed a surfboard and immediately paddled out to the dolphins. "He figured this was a once in a million chance."

Added Virginia Krutchfield of Ben Lomond: "I didn't believe this woman when she first told me. I had to look for myself. I'm sure there are a few surprised seals out there."

This year's El Nino phenomenon has raised ocean temperatures to the

point many warm water species from Southern California and Mexico have been coming north to Monterey Bay.

Fishermen have reported yellow fin tuna and swordfish and a 130-pound marlin was caught off Santa Cruz last month.