

Do Dolphins and Elephants Have Names for Each Other?

Scientists are testing whether some animal calls point to one special individual, almost like a name.



Two dolphins appear to communicate underwater as sound rings move through the water.

Researchers are trying to decide whether some animal sounds work like names. According to reporting by Live Science, the strongest evidence comes from bottlenose dolphins. Young dolphins make their own special whistles. Scientists call them signature whistles, meaning sounds that identify one **dolphin**.

That matters because names help us find one person in a busy place. A dolphin group can be busy too. Dolphins travel, hunt, and work together in water where seeing far is hard. A **whistle** can reach through the water when a fin or face cannot be seen.

Scientists have tested this by playing dolphin whistles through underwater speakers. Dolphins can copy another dolphin's special whistle when they want **contact**. They can also recognize the shape of that whistle, even when a different dolphin makes it. That is a bit like knowing a friend's name in a new voice.

Elephants may do something similar. Researchers have studied wild African elephants and their low rumbles. A **rumble** is a deep sound you may feel as much as hear. In tests, elephants moved toward a **speaker** faster when it played a call meant for them. They also called back more. But that elephant study was a preprint, which means other experts had not fully checked it yet.

Small parrots called spectacled parrotlets may use special calls too. Pet parrots can learn the names of people and animals at home. Still, scientists are careful. A **parrot** repeating a word may not be thinking about names the same way a person does.

In a July 2026 paper, researchers set rules for stronger proof. A real animal name should point to one individual. It should be a **symbol**, which means the sound stands for that individual in the caller's mind. At least two animals should share that meaning.

Not every case meets those rules yet. Some small monkeys called marmosets may aim calls at certain family members. Other scientists think they might just be copying sounds.

The big idea is not that animals talk exactly like humans. The idea is that some animals may keep track of each other in surprisingly careful ways. If a dolphin hears its own whistle, it may respond as if the call is for it.

Written from reporting by Live Science.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. What kind of proof would convince you that an animal is using a name, not just making a familiar sound?

A strong answer: A strong answer should weigh evidence such as repeated use, response by the right animal, and whether the sound seems to stand for one individual.

2. Is it fair to use the word “name” for animal calls, or should scientists use a different word? Defend your view.

A strong answer: A strong answer should compare human names with animal sounds while noticing both similarities and limits.

3. Scientists sometimes play recorded calls to animals to learn how they respond. What are the benefits and risks of that method?

A strong answer: A strong answer should discuss learning important information while also considering animal stress, confusion, or disturbance.

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C T N B C A C N S O I O
R O X A C E S H A P L A
A N O T E R T C P E H S
T P C O N T A C T I W K
O A R E A T N O U R N R
L R U L O W O E U H U U
O R H E L H U A D H N M
D O L P H I N R R T N B
K T E T N S O O D O B L
K D S S S T R E R O D E
S Y M B O L S K L O T S
R W O S P E A K E R I T

CONTACT

DOLPHIN

PARROT

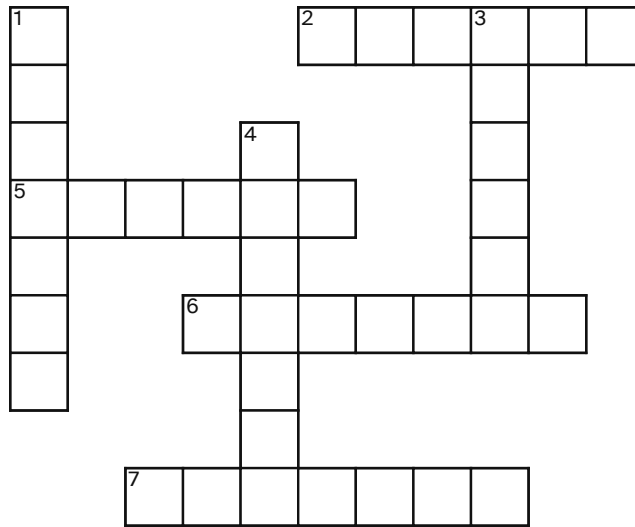
RUMBLE

SPEAKER

SYMBOL

WHISTLE

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ACROSS

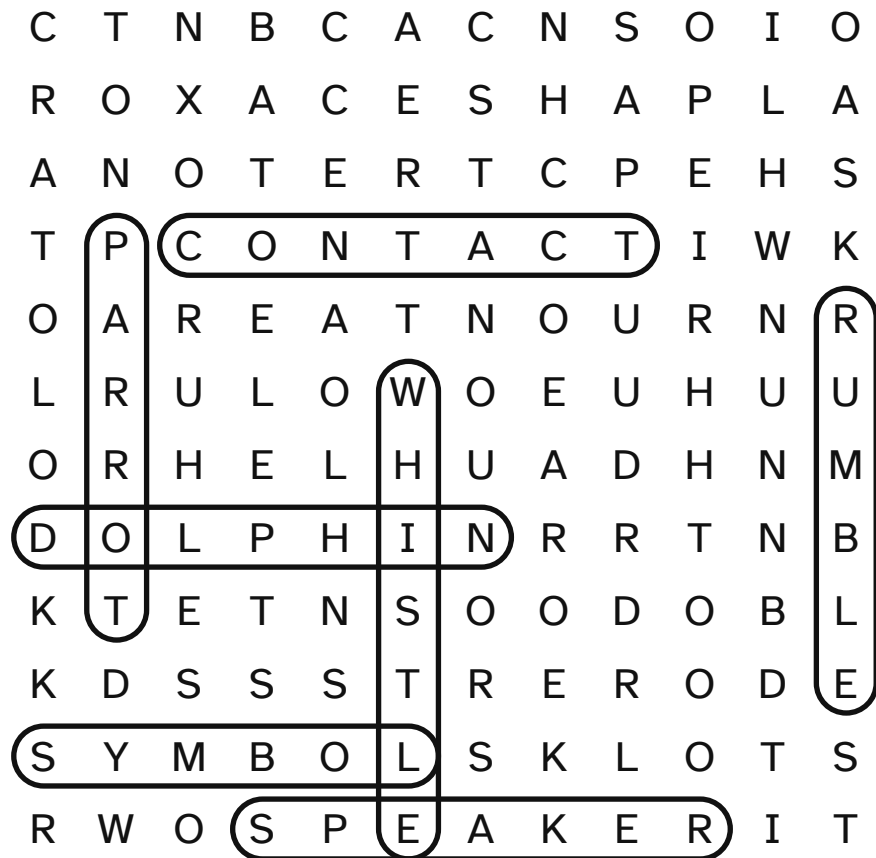
- 2 Bird that can learn to copy noises, including human speech
- 5 Something that stands for an idea, object, or person
- 6 Device that plays noises so people can hear them
- 7 Communication or connection between people

DOWN

- 1 Clear, high noise that can travel through water
- 3 Deep, low noise that may be felt as well as heard
- 4 Smart sea mammal that uses special calls to communicate

Do Dolphins and Elephants Have Names for Each Other?

— answer key



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RUMBLE

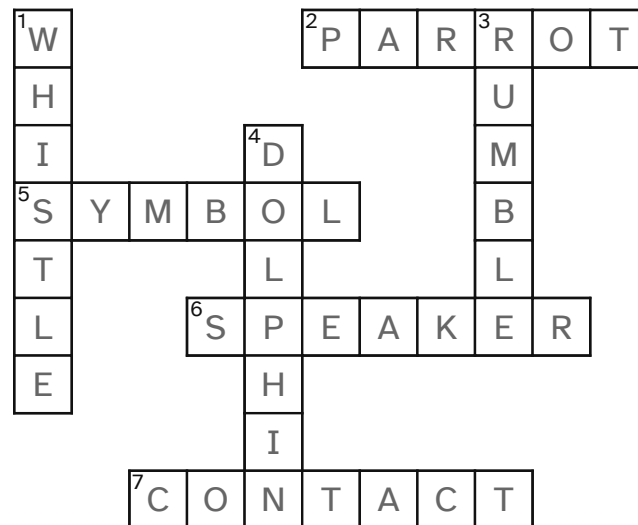
SPEAKER

SYMBOL

WHISTLE

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Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Live Science

“Do other animals call each other by name?”

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<https://www.livescience.com/animals/do-other-animals-call-each-other-by-name>

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article with a note on each question, a word search, a crossword, and the answer key to both.

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