

Chasing the Yangtze's Smile – The Porpoise Story

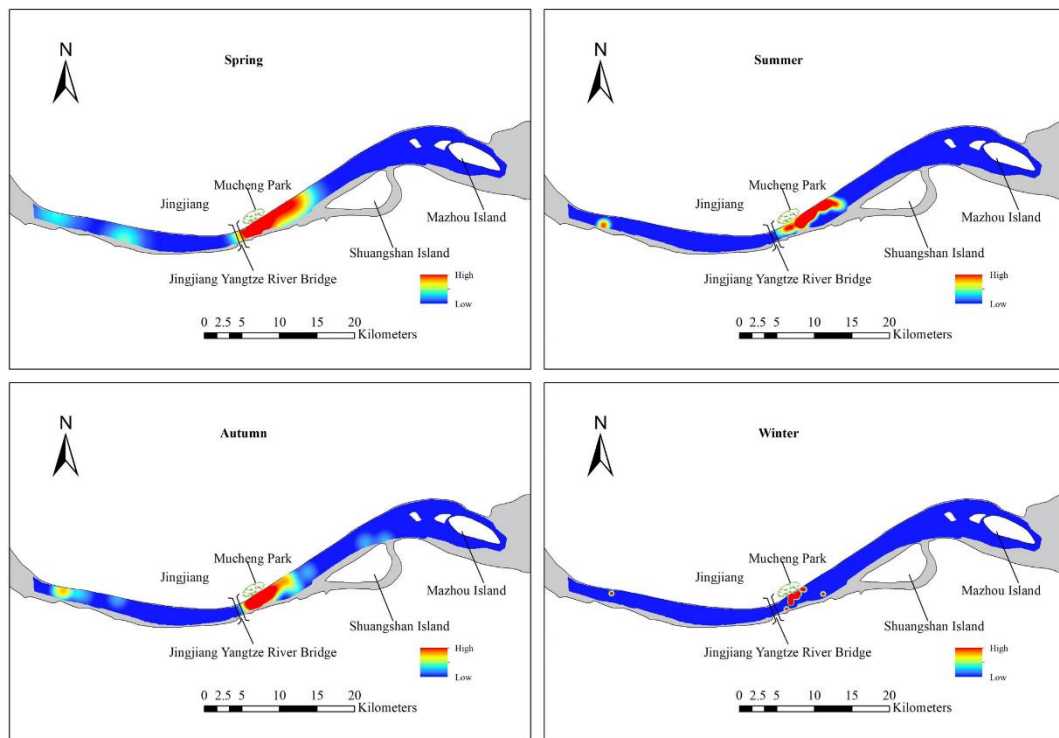
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Robert Tsui

If you asked me about the mammal group I've had the worst luck with in my wildlife-watching experience, I'd say that is Cetacea: I went whale watching in both Hong Kong and Hualien, and came back empty-handed both times. BUT THIS TIME, let's forget the sea that disappointed me. Instead, enter the inland city of Jingjiang (靖江), located on the northern bank of the Yangtze River.

The Yangtze is home to one cetacean species—the Yangtze finless porpoise (*Neophocaena asiaeorientalis*). It is the only member of the seven species of porpoise (Phocoenidae) living in fresh water. This smiley-faced creature suffered a sharp population decline from the 1990s to 2017, but thanks to strengthened conservation efforts along the river in recent years, its numbers have begun to recover and have now exceeded 1,400. Today, porpoises can be spotted in many provinces along the Yangtze's banks: Jiangsu (江苏), Anhui (安徽), and Hubei (湖北). However, in summer, many cities—such as Nanjing (南京) and Nantong (南通)—though generally regarded as good spots of porpoise watching, tend to have relatively low sighting probabilities. Jingjiang is one of the nearest locations where porpoises are regularly seen, and it offers the highest chance of a summer sighting. In fact, around 42 Yangtze finless porpoises, belonging to two populations, stably inhabit the Jingjiang section of the Yangtze River. One Rednote (Xiaohongshu) blogger even reported spotting porpoises there for ten consecutive days.

To chase the Yangtze's smile, I took a ride-share from Shanghai to Jingjiang, which took more than two hours. I arrived at the hotel around midnight and, after a short sleep, got up at 6 a.m. Since the hotel I booked is near the river, it took me only about five minutes by taxi to reach the riverbank. According to a paper on porpoise conservation, the best spot for sightings in Jingjiang is the riverbank at Mucheng Park (牧城公园). However, I spent half an hour walking under the scorching sun to find the exact location shown in that blogger's videos, because I had misjudged the scenery from his footage. Eventually, I found some shade under a tree, sat on a low wall, and waited for the porpoises to appear.



Distribution pattern of Yangtze finless porpoises in Jingjiang section from the paper *Two Strategies for Researching the Endangered Yangtze Finless Porpoises Suggest Data-Poor Areas Are Worthy of Greater Conservation Efforts*

For the next half hour, I kept scanning the river through my camera while various ships passed by. Then, around 7:30 a.m., one small black shape suddenly broke the surface right in my field of view hundreds of meters away, then the second followed. Without hesitation, I pressed the shutter, capturing that amazing moment. They dove back down immediately. When I checked the photos, I couldn't help but shout with excitement. Since summer is the breeding season for porpoises, I guessed they were a mother and her calf. This was not only my first-ever photo of wild cetaceans but also a precious record of a porpoise family.

At around 8:30 a.m., an old man came up to me carrying a large, long camera. He asked when I had arrived to look for porpoises and shared with me his previous photos and videos. He told me he lived in Jingjiang and came to the riverbank very often. We chatted and exchanged our wildlife-watching experiences. During our conversation, he gave me some detailed tips on the best times and spots for spotting porpoises along the Jingjiang riverbank. While we were watching together, the porpoises surfaced about ten times. We noticed that the peak sighting window in the morning was between 8:30 and 9:30 a.m.; after 10 a.m., they rarely appeared. It was a

pity that they only showed their backs and dived back under, rather than jumping out and displaying their full bodies. But for my first porpoise trip, this was more than enough. While waiting, we also spotted various birds flying above the river, including cormorants, egrets, terns, lapwings, and sandpipers.



My first-ever photo of wild cetaceans, breaking the water surface



A porpoise mother and her calf maybe



A porpoise showing its back and causing little disturbance of water



A flock of great cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) flying above the river

The population trend of the Yangtze finless porpoise, combined with my own experience in Jingjiang, seems to tell me that life has a strong capacity to recover from threats when the environment is suitable. The porpoise population declined to about 1,000 individuals but rebounded to over 1,400 in just a few years after the fishing ban took effect. An even more extreme example in China is the crested ibis:

there were only seven left in the 1980s, yet today the population exceeds 10,000. This echoes a line from the film Jurassic Park: "Life finds a way." It is never too late to start paying attention and protecting these wonderful animals before they disappear. Seeing specimens in a museum can never compare to witnessing precious life in the wild.

TIPS for porpoise watching in Jingjiang:

1. How to reach Jingjiang: fly to Shanghai first and take a ride-share for 2-3 hours to your hotel in Jingjiang if you are from a faraway place, or take a train to Jiangyin (江阴) and reach your hotel by taxi for about half an hour.
2. Which hotel: all hotels near the river will be okay. The hotel I booked is Mercure Jingjiang Incity Plaza (靖江印象城美居酒店) at a price of 257 yuan per night.
3. When and where to watch: the highest spotting probability in Mucheng Park from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. (my own experience) and in Jingjiang Flower Sea Park (靖江花海公园) from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. (from the old man's words).
4. What to bring: a telephoto lens and a pair of binoculars will be needed because porpoises appear at a distance of 200-800 meters from the riverbank according to the paper and my own experience.