

CETACEANS OF EASTERN ENGLAND

This region includes waters from the Scottish Border at Berwick-Upon-Tweed (Northumberland) to Great Yarmouth, Norfolk. The waters of the central and southern North Sea are generally less than 40 metres depth, reaching a maximum of 70 metres. The region is not particularly rich in cetacean species, the most commonly occurring being those associated with relatively shallow continental seas, such as harbour porpoise and white-beaked dolphin.

As one goes northwards in the North Sea, however, the cetacean fauna increases in richness (both in numbers of animals and diversity of species). The coastal waters of north-east England, lying as they do adjacent to the central North Sea, are moderately rich, with twelve species of cetacean recorded in nearshore waters of this northern part since 1980. Of these, five species (a little under 20% of 28 UK species) are either present throughout the year or recorded annually as seasonal visitors to the region. Ten species of cetaceans have been recorded in the southern area, of which three (10% of the 28 UK species) have been recorded regularly since 1980.

The harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin are listed in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive as species whose conservation requires the designation of Special Areas of Conservation.

ASCOBANS (Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Sea) is an international agreement between countries bordering the North and Baltic Seas, with the aim of promoting the conservation of small cetaceans. It was ratified by the UK in 1993. Principal states agree to cooperate on issues including national legislation and research into, for example, cetacean population sizes and the effects of fishing.

CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION

Minke whale

Balaenoptera acutorostrata

Recorded in small numbers along the Northumberland coast in the vicinity of Farne Deep and offshore, occurring mainly between June and September. Present also in small numbers off Flamborough Head (Yorkshire) and the north Humberside coast, mainly between July and October.





Killer whale
Orcinus orca

Recorded most years in small pods numbering up to a dozen animals, around the Farne Islands, and occasionally offshore. Killer whales occur mainly between June and September.

Harbour porpoise
Phocoena phocoena

Widely distributed in the region. Recorded in all months of the year, but most frequently (and in greatest numbers) between July and November, particularly September. Occurs in small numbers in nearshore waters mainly off the Northumberland coast, including around the Farnes and Holy Island. Peak numbers occur in April and between July and November.

Also seen in the region of the Dogger Bank, mainly between July and November.



Bottlenose dolphin
Tursiops truncatus

Uncommon, although sightings have occurred with increasing frequency in recent years. Recorded mainly between April and September, usually singly or in small groups, and primarily in the northern part of the region off the Northumberland coast.



Atlantic white-sided dolphin

Lagenorhynchus acutus

Deep water species recorded generally more than 10 km from the coast; most sightings have occurred north-east of Flamborough Head (Yorkshire) between July and September.

Also seen in the vicinity of Dogger Bank, mainly between July and November.



White-beaked dolphin

Lagenorhynchus albirostris

The commonest dolphin in the region, and widely distributed, occurring mainly offshore. Most sightings between June and September. Recorded in all months of the year with no strong seasonal peak in frequency or abundance in the region, although only rarely recorded between January and March.

Other cetacean species recorded in the region include: Fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus*, Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, Sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, Beluga *Delphinapterus leucas*, Short-beaked common dolphin *Delphinus delphis*, Bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*, and Long-finned pilot whale *Globicephala melas*. Between 1986 and 1991, a sociable male bottlenose dolphin, which was named "Freddie" was resident in the vicinity of Amble, Northumberland.

REGIONAL MAP



Sightings hotspots:

- 1) Holy Island (Northumberland)
- 2) Farne Islands (Northumberland)
- 3) Cullercoats (Tyne & Wear)
- 4) Souter Lighthouse (Tyne & Wear)
- 5) Robin Hood's Bay (North Yorks)
- 6) Flamborough Head (East Riding, Yorks)
- 7) Spurn Head (Humberside)
- 8) Gibraltar Point (Lincolnshire)
- 9) Skegness (Lincolnshire)
- 10) Great Yarmouth (Norfolk)

Spurn Head, Humberside



Farne Islands, Northumberland



Robin Hood's Bay, North Yorkshire



Souter Lighthouse, Tyne & Wear



Flamborough Head, East Riding of Yorks



THREATS TO CETACEANS

Cetaceans face three main pressures in the region from human activities: the first is conflicts with fisheries either by competition for common food resource or accidental capture in fishing gear. North of the Humber, inshore fishermen have reported porpoises caught accidentally in trammel nets and set gill nets. Other reports include the accidental capture of harbour porpoise, white-beaked dolphin and white-sided dolphin in salmon drift nets, Dutch midwater trawl, purse seines and longliners. Actual numbers on catch levels are not available.



The second threat is habitat degradation through pollution although contaminant levels in cetaceans from the region are comparatively low.

The third threat is recreational activities near resorts such as Amble, Whitby, and Scarborough. Speedboats and jet skis may cause physical damage through collision with cetaceans. Vessel propeller or engine noise may overlap with sound frequencies used by cetaceans, causing disturbance which may result in negative responses such as vessel avoidance or increased dive time. Seismic activity, part of oil and gas exploration in the North Sea, uses low frequency noise which may affect baleen whales directly, or other cetaceans indirectly by changes in distribution of prey fish stocks.

