



PRESS RELEASE
MAY 2006

Scottish eyes scan seas for the return of the minkes

Scientists and volunteers will be carefully scanning the seas around the Scottish coastline over the next few weeks to see whether minke whales return in their usual numbers.

Last year the marine conservation charity Sea Watch Foundation reported that sightings of minke whales were significantly reduced off the west coast of Scotland, probably caused by a regional shortage of sprats on which they feed.

The 10-day National Whale and Dolphin Watch, organised by the charity, saw overall sightings of individuals fall from 286 in August 2004 to just 150 in 2005, reflecting a general downturn for the entire summer season.

This year's Watch takes place from August 12-20, offering another opportunity to compare total numbers of whales and dolphins off the coast of the UK, but it is in the coming weeks that scientists expect to find out if the minkes are returning to Scottish waters.

Sea Watch Research Director Dr Peter Evans: "Sightings of minke whales are more common from May to October when herring, sprats, sandeels and other fish upon which they depend are concentrated in shallower coastal waters.

"We will be carefully monitoring reports over the next few weeks to see whether they return and there have been a couple of sightings but difficult to say yet what this means for the summer season.

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"Last year there was a shortage of sprats. We are not sure why, but it may have been related to oceanographic changes and we suspect that the minke whales shifted their distribution since minkes had a good summer further south in the Irish Sea as well as off eastern Scotland."



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The National Whale and Dolphin Watch is organised by Sea Watch Foundation and sponsored by British Gas, Defra and Heritage Lottery Fund. It is an opportunity for the public to become involved in the monitoring of whales, dolphins and porpoises off the entire coast of Britain by attending organised watches on land or at sea or by reporting sightings. More details of the event can be found on www.seawatchfoundaton.org.uk

Notes to editors

Minke whales can grow to around 8.5m (28ft long), weigh up to 10 tonnes, can swim at up to 20km an hour and live for around 40 years. They are the smallest of the baleen whales and are widely distributed, although in small numbers, particularly along the Atlantic seaboard of Europe. They are often solitary, although highly inquisitive, and, especially when young, they have been frequently known to approach boats. Each dive lasts for three to eight minutes before they resurface to breathe.

They are at risk from commercial whaling, accidental capture in fishing gear, and from pollution.

Sea Watch Foundation's website carries information about the 2006 National Whale and Dolphin Watch, including guides to identification and details of local groups and events around the coast – visit www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk to find out more.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR PICTURES PLEASE CONTACT:

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Pictures

A range of eye-catching print quality files pictures of a number of species are available by request. Please contact Clare Dickins or Wendy Nekar, details above, for further details.