SPECIES FACT SHEET –

Atlantic White-sided Dolphin
(Lagenorhynchus acutus)

Photo © Heike Vester

Measurements

Length

Newborn: 1.08-1.22 m
Full grown: Up to 2.5 m (female), 2.8 m (male)

Weight

Newborn: c. 25 kg
Full grown: Up to 182 kg (female), c. 235 kg (male)

Identification

At Sea

Resembles white-beaked dolphin but smaller, slimmer, and more agile. Distinctly marked with black body and long white then yellow or ochre blaze on flanks; no white on tail stock behind fin (present in white-beaked dolphin). Fin tall, erect and recurved. Less agile than common and striped dolphins, but active at surface, commonly breaches (at low angle), only occasionally bow-rides.

On Land

Dark dolphin with short well-defined beak. General form stouter than common or striped but less than white-beaked or bottlenose. Small (c. 5 mm diameter), sharp-pointed teeth: total count 58-80/58-80 (upper/lower jaw).

Description

Head

The snout is rounded with a short beak. A black eye ring extends in a thin line to the upper jaw, and a thin stripe extends backwards to the flippers which are moderately large and pointed at the tips.

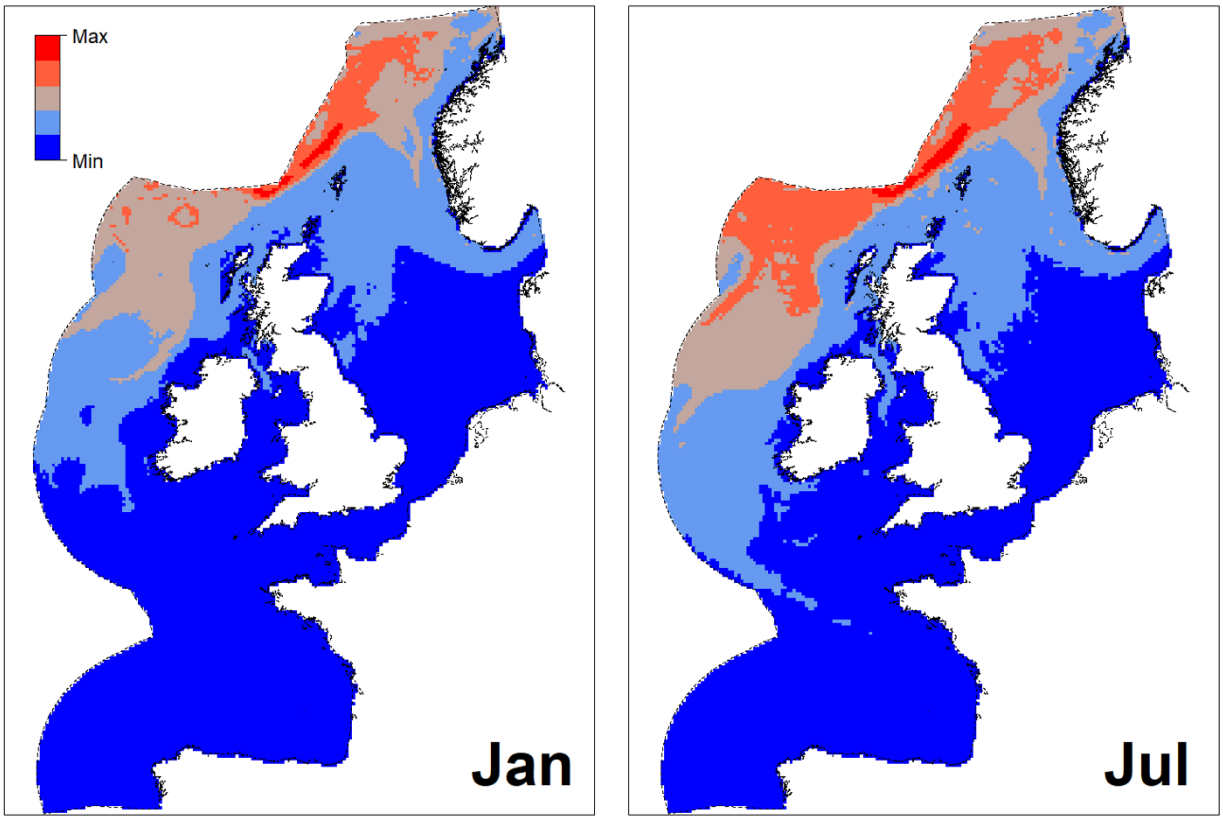
Body, Fin & Markings

It has a large and fairly robust body. It is often confused with the white-beaked dolphin - the Atlantic white-sided dolphin can be distinguished by its smaller, slimmer, body, and by a white patch on the sides which runs into a yellow-ochre streak just before the tail. The white-beaked dolphin has white patches on flank that run onto the dorsal surface behind the dorsal fin, whereas white-sided dolphins have black to dark grey behind dorsal fin. Colour pattern in juveniles is more muted with less distinct flank markings. It has a tall, centrally placed, falcate, dorsal fin and a notably thick tail stock particularly in adult males, which suddenly narrows at the fluke.

Distribution

Global Distribution

Distribution is restricted to temperate and sub-polar seas of the northern North Atlantic. Its regular range extends from SW Greenland, Iceland and the western Barents Sea southward to the Georges Bank in the western Atlantic and SW Ireland in the eastern Atlantic.



Overall Distribution of Atlantic White-sided Dolphin around British Isles (Source: Waggitt et al., 2020)

European Waters

The species is found offshore from SW Greenland, around the Faroes, Iceland and West Norway. It also occurs less commonly in the northern and central North Sea and only occasionally further east in Danish waters and the Baltic. It shares a similar distribution to the white-beaked dolphin but tends to occur more offshore, particularly along the slope of the continental shelf.

UK & Ireland

In the summer, the white-sided dolphin is commonly sighted in more coastal waters of north-western and northern Scotland. It also occurs along the west coast of Ireland out to the shelf edge. It is rarely seen in the Irish Sea, English Channel, and southern North Sea.

Abundance

Population estimates have been difficult to obtain due to confusion with the white-beaked dolphin. However, SCANS & ObSERVE surveys (in summer 2016) in the NW European shelf seas from southern Norway to Portugal yielded an estimate of 17,400 individuals. The species is more common in the eastern part of Iceland and towards the Faroe Islands than elsewhere in the central and eastern North Atlantic. In that area, the abundance of the species during 2007 surveys was estimated at 42,500.

Habitat

It inhabits cold temperate North Atlantic waters usually over the continental shelf slope, extending into deeper oceanic waters of 100-300 m depth. Occasionally the species inhabits coastal areas where it may enter fjords and inlets with depth <50 m. It is more pelagic than white-beaked dolphin. Most sightings in UK waters have been at SSTs of 7-13° C. Like many other smaller species of dolphin in these waters, it appears to move nearer shore in summer.

Diet

Atlantic white-sided dolphins are pelagic feeders taking herring, silver pout, blue whiting, scad, lantern fish, argentine, and mackerel as well as some squid and shrimps. They appear to feed co-operatively, with small groups frequently seen herding fish by surface-rushing in a crescent-shaped configuration.

Behaviour

Group sizes in UK waters are typically six to thirty animals, but the species may form large pods of up to one thousand individuals offshore, especially along the shelf edge west and south of Britain & Ireland. Within pods, there is often a high ratio of females to males, and it is possible that some males form separate ‘bachelor’ pods. Mixed groups frequently form with white-beaked dolphins, less often with bottlenose and common dolphins; sometimes the species may associate with long-finned pilot whales, northern bottlenose whales, sperm, fin, or humpback whales. It can be very conspicuous at sea, being acrobatic with frequent breaches and tail slapping. A fast and powerful swimmer, it will occasionally swim alongside vessels, bow-riding in front of faster ships, or riding the waves created by larger whales.

Life History

The age at sexual maturity is 7-11 years for males and 6-12 years for females. The calving interval is 2-3 years. Juvenile and adult survival rates are not well known. The calving season is thought to be between May and August, with a peak in the British Isles between April and July. Gestation period is c. 11 months. The life span of the dolphins has been estimated at up to 22 years for males and 27 years for females. Individual and mass strandings are not unusual in this species.

Conservation Threats

Atlantic white-sided dolphins continue to be hunted opportunistically in drive fisheries in the Faroe Islands with 806 animals killed there between 2006-10 and 430 animals between 2011-15. Living generally offshore in deep waters, it is not exposed to pollution or human disturbance from vessels to the extent that coastal species can be. The main threats in NW European seas are entanglement in fishing gear and possibly prey depletion, with substantial by-catches recorded on occasions from mid-water trawl fisheries west and south of Ireland, and in the past, salmon driftnets are known to have caused by-catch of the species. They are legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

IUCN status: Least Concern.

References

Cipriano, F. (2018) Atlantic white-sided dolphin *Lagenorhychus acutus.* Pp. 42-44. In: *Encyclopaedia of Marine Mammals* (B. Würsig, J.G.M. Thewissen, and K.M. Kovacs, Eds). Academic Press, London & San Diego. 1,157pp.

Evans, P.G.H. (2020) Atlantic white-sided dolphin *Lagenorhynchus acutus.* Pp. 97-100. In: *European Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises.* Marine Mammal Conservation in Practice. Academic Press, London & San Diego. 306pp.

Evans, P.G.H. and Smeenk, C. (2008) Atlantic White-sided Dolphin *Leucopleura acutus*. Pp. 727-731. In: *Mammals of the British Isles*. (Eds. S. Harris and D.W. Yalden). Handbook. 4th Edition. The Mammal Society, Southampton. 800pp.

Evans, P.G.H. and Waggitt, J.J. (2020) Atlantic White-sided Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus acutus*. Pp. 170-171.
In: *Atlas of the Mammals of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (D. Crawley, F. Coomber, L. Kubasiewicz, C. Harrower, P. Evans, J. Waggitt, B. Smith, and F. Mathews, Eds). Published for The Mammal Society by Pelagic Publishing, Exeter. 205pp.

Evans, P.G.H., Anderwald, P., and Baines, M.E. (2003) *UK Cetacean Status Review*. Report to English Nature & Countryside Council for Wales. 160pp.

Jefferson, T.A., Webber, M.A., and Pitman, R.L. (2015) Atlantic White-sided Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus acutus*. Pp. 285-288. In: *Marine Mammals of the World*. A Comprehensive Guide to their Identification. Academic Press, London & San Diego. 608pp.

Reeves, R.R., Smeenk, C., Brownell, R.L. Jr, and Kiuze, C.C. (1999) Atlantic White-sided Dolphin – *Lagennorhynchus acutus* (Gray, 1828).
Pp. 31-56. In: *Handbook of Marine Mammals. Volume 6: The Second Book of Dolphins and the Porpoises* (Eds. S.H. Ridgway and R. Harrison). Academic Press, San Diego. 486pp.

Reid, J.B., Evans, P.G.H. and Northridge, S.P. (2003) *Atlas of Cetacean Distribution in North-west European Waters*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough. 76pp.

Waggitt, J.J., Evans, P.G.H., Andrade, J., Banks, A.N, Boisseau, O., Bolton, M., Bradbury, G., *et al.* (2020) Distribution maps of cetacean and seabird populations in the North-East Atlantic. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 57: 253-269. DOI: 10.1111/1365-2664.13525.