



News sheet - Feb 2004

Report from Iain Macdonald – regional co-ordinator for North-east Scotland

Sightings from east Ross-shire excluding the Black-Isle and from Sutherland for the three-month period December 2003- February 2004

Summary

There were quite a few days when conditions were suitable for viewing cetaceans, but sightings remained elusive. The probability of encountering cetaceans during a timed visit was approximately one successful session out of every six. Of forty-one separate timed watches, involving a total of 830 minutes of recording time, cetaceans were recorded during seven sessions.

The most interesting record was a sighting of a harbour porpoise within Loch Fleet, an almost enclosed body of salt water which largely drains at low tide. This is the first report from the loch that I am aware of, and the porpoise was likely to be in shallow water of less than four metres depth. The depth is not unusual for porpoises that can on occasion be seen virtually within the breaking surf zone at Embo, but the entry into the narrow channel leading into Loch Fleet is possibly more unusual. The channel is less than 100 metres wide.

Another interesting sighting was of an extremely small bottlenose dolphin calf seen off Balintore on the north side of the Moray Firth at the beginning of January. The calf was presumed to be very young and surfacing frequently following shallow dives.

Sightings:

Sunday 14/12/03. Approximately 20 bottlenose dolphins were seen off Balintore, Ross-shire. Going east 400 metres offshore. Dolphins turned west. Lots of breaching, chasing and tail slapping on the surface were observed.

Thursday 01/01/04. Eight bottlenose dolphins were seen off Balintore, Ross-shire. One presumed female was accompanied by a very small and pale calf. A second presumed female was accompanied by a larger calf. All were going east at a slow swim speed.

Friday 02/01/04. Three harbour porpoises were seen off Rockfield, Ross-shire.

Sunday 04/01/04. Two plus one harbour porpoise were seen off Embo, Sutherland.

Tuesday 06/01/04. Single harbour porpoise were seen off Embo, Sutherland, recorded by David Patterson.

Tuesday 06/01/04. Single harbour porpoise observed in Loch Fleet, Sutherland recorded by Miss Barclay.

Saturday 17/01/04. Four blows were heard close to shore from land beside Stoer Head Lighthouse, Sutherland. No cetaceans actually seen.

Sunday 01/02/04. Five plus two harbour porpoises were seen off Embo, Sutherland.

Sunday 15/02/04. Approximately 20 harbour porpoises sighted off Stoer Head Lighthouse, Sutherland. They were within 200 metres of land, and their blows were audible from land.

Report from Peter Macdonald – regional co-ordinator for North Grampian

With more seasonal weather this year for this time of year, watching and encountering cetaceans has been a bit of a hit or a miss affair.

January 2nd saw a fantastic watch with over 30+ people coming over to Hopeman, sadly no cetaceans were seen but on the 5th, six bottlenose dolphins were encountered off Daisy rock

Other sightings in the first half of the month were recorded at Burghead and Spey Bay.

Despite the gales, we held two watches in January both with a good turn out of people but sadly not of cetaceans. The last week of the month saw sightings of dolphins at Buckie and Findochty.

February roared in and at times seemed unable to stop. Sea states were high and sightings only seen on a casual basis. Good sightings on the third week of the month saw bottlenose dolphins in groups of 5+ to 12 we also recorded our first harbour porpoise on the 18th. An unknown shark was seen by a birder at Spey bay on the 20th. Sadly the last week of the month saw the gales and blizzards return.

Despite the bad weather, the Firth has been a fine place to watch out from, with a fantastic array of birds seen, Fulmars are wheeling about the cliffs and on a beach watch at Spey Bay on the 29th we even saw an otter. In the coming months, we are planning to do a watch on the first Sunday of the month and also an all-coast watch on the third Sunday

We have also lined up Bob Reid from the SAC to talk about his work as Scottish Strandings Co-ordinator (timely as we found a dead harbour porpoise on the 29th) and will also host a meeting in April with Dr Kenny Taylor. For further details, please visit <http://www.loupers.com/>

Report from Kevin Hepworth – regional co-ordinator for South Grampian

Bottlenose dolphins - as usual through late winter and into spring, the sightings of bottlenose dolphins really take off with almost guaranteed daily sightings of large groups of dolphins feeding at Aberdeen harbour entrance. During January and February, 64 bottlenose dolphin sightings were reported, with almost one-third of these from Aberdeen Harbour, and the rest split evenly between the environs of Montrose and Stonehaven. The last week of February suffered with no sightings at all due to 12-15 inches of snow over a five-day period and mountainous seas in the gale force northerly air-stream. Group sizes ranged from three to 50+, with an unsubstantiated report of over 90 heading north past Montrose on the 15th February. Generally, 20-25 was not uncommon, often with a relatively high ratio of juveniles to adults (1:3 or 1:4 at times) and a couple of smaller calves on occasion. When present at Aberdeen Harbour, the animals tended to be around for several hours and would be fairly acrobatic during feeding frenzies with salmon being thrown around, followed by much quieter periods in between, when they often headed up towards the Don mouth or round into Nigg Bay before returning to the harbour area. As usual, the animals would enter inside the harbour confines but this winter they seem to have been particularly bold, often getting up inside the harbour beyond Albert Quay - a real treat for anyone at the roundhouse as the animals were often only 5-10 metres from the land allowing perfect ID on 19 January of two individuals known as A1 and A16 from the report by Caroline and Karen.

Towards the middle of February, the animals have appeared to be much more mobile, often being reported passing Montrose and Stonehaven only to arrive at the harbour a couple of hours later. On the 14th February, two groups of animals (45 in total) were followed by car from Catterline to Aberdeen in just over two hours, which meant the animals covered almost 25 miles as the crow flies in fairly quick time.

Harbour porpoise - The calm before the storm in mid-February meant that a pretty good number of porpoise sightings came in, with several from the land and at least half a dozen during the two boat surveys which got out on Friday the 13th February (the anniversary of our humpback sightings in 2003, but perhaps for the superstitious it was a bit hopeful to expect the same again, although a very flat sea did yield around 18 porpoise and a medium-sized group of bottlenose dolphins) and the boat survey on the 21st February, in choppy seas we also encountered porpoises (and the first gannets and puffins of the year). Ironically, the dolphins were seen both before and after the boat survey from the land at Aberdeen Harbour, but not during the boat trip, although around ten porpoises were seen. Land-based porpoise sightings were generally of one or two individuals, with four (one juvenile) around Nigg

Bay on the 31st January and four at Girdleness on 29th February, suggesting that the last day of the month is optimum for seeing these delightful wee animals. Again, sightings were quite widespread, coming in from Stonehaven to Collieston, but with four or five from the Donmouth which is unlike previous years, although it is likely to be a reflection of where the effort was concentrated rather than lack of previous sightings.

Minke whale - an anecdotal (local Stonehaven fisherman) passed-on report of two minke whales fairly close in to Stonehaven on January 17th represents an unusual early record of these animals. Unusually, this day also produced two other records of unidentified whales, with blows reported from both Stonehaven and Collieston and only an hour apart. Unfortunately the swell was sufficient to prevent further sightings or ID.

Unidentified whale species - three records. In addition to the two mentioned above, a second-hand report from early February from the coastguard at Johnshaven of two groups of 4-5 animals travelling south came in, but no ID was possible.

Report from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust – regional co-ordinator for SW Scotland & Inner Hebrides

Sightings and strandings summaries for west coast of Scotland, Dec 2003 – Feb 2004.

Sightings

Sparkle and Starlight, two identified bottlenose dolphins, are back off the west coast of Scotland. They were first spotted on 16/01/2004 around Crossapol Bay, Isle of Coll, by a local fisherman. They have been there for a month now, playing around boats, in Gunna Sound and the south part of the Isle of Coll.

The bottlenose dolphins Sparkle and Starlight were first seen in 1994 by Sea Life Surveys, a local whale-watching company. Sparkle, the mother, was spotted in a small stretch of water between the Isles of Coll and Tiree. Swimming alongside her was a small calf, later called Starlight. It is likely that Sparkle was originally part of a group of bottlenose dolphin and that somehow she became separated from this group. She has a large scar around her neck. They hadn't been seen in the area for almost three years and it was a pleasure to see them back. Starlight is now an adult. They are both very playful and enjoy bow-riding boats.

On Saturday 14th February, a group of 10-12 harbour porpoises were spotted in the Sound of Mull, off Tobermory Lighthouse. They were feeding in the area, and after a while, split up in smaller groups. Three days later (17th February), a group of about 30 bottlenose dolphins (including two very young calves), came to visit Tobermory Bay. They were first spotted near Craignure, Isle of Mull, in the morning and travelled all the way up to Tobermory. They arrived in Tobermory Harbour in mid-afternoon. Meanwhile, two harbour porpoises passed without stopping near Calve Island, off Tobermory Bay.

Strandings

An unusual number of strandings was reported in the early part of this year. On 14th of January, a 20ft long minke whale was found beached on the west coast of the Isle of Colonsay. The baleen plates were missing and the body cavities did not appear to be open, which may indicate that the animal had been dead for more than 4 weeks. Besides, the tail flukes were missing and it may suggest that it had been entangled.

On 24th January, a Cuvier's beaked whale was found beached by a local farmer near Kilninian, on the west side of the Isle of Mull. The Cuvier's beaked whale was a male, of about 18ft long. No apparent trauma was seen on the body. Samples of the skin, blubber, muscles, as well as a rib and a scapula were taken and sent to Aberdeen University for dietary analysis and looking at the ratios of different isotopes of carbon and nitrogen in the collagen of the bones. The stomach contents were also taken and sent to Bob Reid. When the stomach contents of the whale were collected, many plastic bags were found and may have caused the death of the whale.

Another Cuvier's beaked whale was also found dead on the Isle of Lewis, end of December 2003.

At the end of January, a 56ft long fin whale was washed ashore on the south-west coast the Isle of Coll. The whale appeared relatively fresh when discovered on the beach. Baleen plates and the skin were still present and may suggest that the animal had been dead for about a week, or less.

During the first two weeks of February, two harbour porpoises (Isles of Colonsay and Islay) as well as a juvenile bottlenose dolphin (Mull of Kintyre) were found dead on the shore.

Report from Andy Tait – regional co-ordinator for Northumberland

January sightings on the North-East coast got off to a slow start Porpoise sightings started with a single animal feeding 500 metres off Lizard Point, South Shields. on 14th. On a very misty 20th, two adult porpoises were seen feeding 100 metres off Lizard Point, about 50 metres apart, then moving off together in a north-easterly direction. Another two porpoises were seen two days later (22nd again off Lizard Point) feeding 100 metres apart, 300 metres offshore in quite a rough sea. The last day of January produced no less than eight adult porpoises seen at the same time spread out feeding within a kilometre of each other near mid-day.

In February, we started seeing porpoises (5) quite early in the morning off Lizard Point on the 2nd, another two adults seen just before lunch and shortly afterwards a mile further north with two separate sightings of a single adult off Marsden Rock. My first watch of the year at Cresswell (a lovely quiet sea at tea time) saw three adult porpoises feeding just five metres off the reef on 12th. The next day (13th), a few minutes stop just to check the sea at Whitburn (Sunderland) produced one adult porpoise travelling about 500 metres off the reef. During two watches on the 16th, four adults and one juvenile were seen feeding off Lizard Point mid afternoon, and an early evening watch at Cresswell (just caught the ice cream shop before it closed) had a delightful view of a mother and calf porpoise just 10 metres out from the reef, resting and feeding very quietly until dusk.

North-east England - Request for Information from Jo Stockill

As part of 'The North Sea: A Sustainable Future' local community programme based at Newcastle University's Dove Marine Laboratory, a survey has been carried out among fishermen, yachts people and boat operators based at the Northumberland ports of Blyth and North Shields. The regular sea goers were asked their opinions about the health of the North Sea, the occurrence of whales and dolphins, and about the presence of what are usually considered to be warm water species in the cold waters of the North Sea.

The results of the survey found that the general opinion among fishermen and others is that the health of the North Sea has improved, especially over the last 10 to 20 years. In particular, the large majority of people interviewed believe that chemical pollution, sewage inputs, oil spills and slicks caused through boats cleaning their tanks, have decreased significantly during this time.

This theory is backed up by an increased number of sightings of porpoise, dolphins and even whales off the North East coast. More common species such as harbour porpoise and white-beaked dolphin were seen by those interviewed on around half of all trips to sea; these offshore sightings were recorded all year round, showing that dolphins are always present relatively close to the coast.

Sightings of minke whales are no longer unusual, with over half of all interviewees having spotted one in the last year. There have been fairly regular sightings of killer whales and long-finned pilot whales: around 30 per cent of interviewees report having seen these species off the coast. Interestingly, one participant claimed to have seen a sperm whale off the Farne Islands. Although sightings of sperm whales are extremely rare in the central North Sea, there is some evidence to back up the report, as three were stranded on the east coast of England in 1997.

Interviewees were also asked to note any sightings of unexpected species encountered off the North-East coast, to investigate how issues like global warming are affecting the local marine environment. Their responses implied that a range of warm water species such as sunfish and red mullet, are now found in the region, suggesting that species are moving north as the average sea temperature rises. One of the most intriguing sightings was reported by a Blyth fisherman who had seen a striped dolphin, a warm water species typically found south of the English Channel. Again, records of strandings provide further evidence that this 'warm water' species is now found off the North-East coast. In 1999, a live striped dolphin was found stranded at Seaburn in Tyne and Wear.

Despite a general consensus regarding the improved health of the North Sea over the last decade or so, fishermen are nevertheless concerned about the impacts of industrial fishing and noise pollution on the marine environment. Nutrient inputs from agricultural run-off and noise pollution in the sea, for example from boat engines, are viewed to have increased over the same period.

Jo Stockill
Dove Marine Laboratory

Report from Jon Bramley – regional co-ordinator for Kent

In Kent, we have had just two records of harbour porpoises to report so far in 2004:

One found dead at Sandwich Bay near Sandwich on 17th Jan - probably a victim of being caught in net as had deep lacerations above the head and below the dorsal fin.

One recovered by British Divers Marine Life Rescue from Palm Bay, Margate on 8th Feb. A release was tried at Sandgate near Folkestone, but the animal did not show signs of recovery and was put down later the same day.

Report from Stephen Savage – regional co-ordinator for Sussex

Following a disappointing year 2003, we have already received two bottlenose dolphin sightings this January in Sussex: one at Selsey Bill on 26th January, and the other near Lancing on 29th January (both in West Sussex). As sightings are rare at this time of the year, it is tempting to suggest that both sightings may be the same group, but there is no way of knowing this.

Since the Sussex regional group started recording in 1991, we have only received one definite observation of bottlenose dolphin in January and two for February.

POD Project

We are reaching the end of our pilot project using a POD cetacean data-logger provided by the Sea Watch Foundation for use off Brighton (East Sussex). This pilot acoustic project has been funded as part of the Wildlife Trusts' South-East Marine Programme. This 2003-04 programme, entitled "Marine biodiversity and aggregates in South East England", is supported by English Nature, through Defra's Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund.

The major problems we had to overcome have been to find a safe place to deploy it as inshore movements are usually between 100 and 200 metres from the shore. It is very tidal area and also heavily used by watersports and other human recreation. A safe method of attachment was also a major hurdle. The pod was tried at various locations before we came up with a suitable site. However, we will have to wait to see how successful it will be through 2004

As a location for erratic sightings of transient dolphins, systematic watches have always posed a problem as effort can greatly change from one year to the next. The POD will hopefully provide us with essential constant effort data. It will also provide us with the opportunity to discover if there are any inshore movements of dolphins at night when the sea is relatively clear of human activity.

Having the POD deployed will also mean that we can encourage more involvement from the public without the need for extensive training, as the data detected by the POD can be used to verify the species observed and similar details. This will hopefully lead to an increase in the volume and quality of data recorded each year.

Report from Kate Martin (Durlston Marine Project) – Regional Co-ordinator for Dorset

27th December 2003 (only just reported), 12.35 - 12.42 hrs: Five dolphins, believed to be common dolphins, seen 1 km east of Portland Bill, 4-500m offshore, breaching, tight association, fast swim, station keeping. The reporter was watching two grey seals 10-15m offshore at the time, and just happened to look up and spot the dolphins! The dolphins swam east to west, position of dorsal was mid, colour and size not determined due to poor light but appeared black. No markings noted. Sea state 7, swell heavy, wind SW, cloud cover 9, sleet then clean and cold.

18th January 2004, 11.00 hrs. Approximately 15 dolphins (including 2-3 calves) seen just outside the southern detached arm of Portland Harbour from a fishing vessel. Thought they were feeding as close to the boat and gulls and gannets overhead. No further information.

13th February 2004, 13.30 - 14.00 hrs, 6-10 bottle nose dolphins seen less than a metre from a motor boat in Portland Harbour, Balaclava Bay. The dolphins were seen to leap, breach and tail slap. Sea state mirror calm.

14th February - Valentines Day special!! Several sightings today, from Seacombe to the Swash Channel:

12.00 - 12.15 hrs Report of two groups of four dolphins seen from the coast path at Seacombe, possibly bottlenose. One group appeared to be slightly smaller than the other, possibly juveniles. Blows were seen as they swam east, 2 canoeists nearby (but no report from them as yet). No further details

12.30 - 13.15 hrs Group of nine dolphins, seven adults and two juveniles, seen from the coast path first at Anvil Lighthouse, travelled east, past Tilly Whim, the dolphin hut, the observation point, and Durlston Head, seen by dolphin watcher and many visitors. A motor boat appeared to be following them at speed. The dolphins swam between the motor boat and a yacht, 40+ gulls overhead. They were approx. 400-500 metres offshore.

12.50 - 13.13 hrs, Six bottlenose dolphins seen by dolphin watcher from "The Downs", Peveril, Swanage, heading east. The dolphins were approx 450 yards offshore, swimming in tight association, slow/normal swim, surfacing regularly with gulls overhead. Sea state 1, swell light, no wind, misty out to sea, visibility still good though approximately 20 km.

16.00 - 17.00 hrs, 10-12 bottlenose dolphins swam in the Swash Channel, seen from a motor boat. One appeared to be considerably smaller than the rest of group, possibly a calf. They swam in loose association in three groups of three. They appeared to be interested in a dredger, then followed the Truckline ferry out to Old Harry, then returned to Swash Channel. Last seen around 5pm. Sea state 1, swell light.

22nd February 2004. At least eight bottlenose dolphins sighted off West Bay, Bridport (submitted by Tom Brereton)

Report from Caroline Weir – Devon

Due to offshore commitments over this period, I have only been able to carry out four timed sea watches from Start Point, South Devon between December 2003 and February 2004. A watch on the 3rd December produced no cetacean sightings, though at sea state 3, viewing conditions were not ideal. I have noticed that there is little point trying to spot cetaceans from Start Point in anything other than flat calm conditions, as the combination of high observation height and tidal rips makes conditions difficult enough anyway! A watch on 15th December had good conditions (sea state 1-2) and produced 12 sightings of harbour porpoise within an hour. Animals were scattered all around the headland in small feeding groups, and at least two porpoises were identified as juveniles. I was offshore between mid-December and the end of January, and so I do not know whether the porpoise activity has remained over the mid-winter period.

My first watch of 2004 occurred on 10th February and produced no cetacean sightings despite ideal conditions and continuous scanning with both telescope and binoculars. However, a dead common dolphin was seen on Mattiscombe beach, a sad reminder of the continuing problems with bycatch off SW England. A two hour sea-watch on 16th February produced six cetacean sightings, including a group of distant dolphins. I estimated 25 dolphins in total but they were well over 5 km offshore and I struggled to conclusively identify them even with the telescope. However, their behaviour, group size, slim shape and apparently contrasting pigmentation along their sides makes me suspect they were common dolphins. The other five sightings involved harbour porpoises feeding in the tidal rips around the headland in small groups of two to five. Although I have only managed four sea watches over this period, indications are that harbour porpoises are now occurring regularly off Start Point throughout the year.

Report from David Ball – Silver Dolphin Centre, Cornwall

There have been lots of live sightings around the Cornish coast this year, with reports of super-pods of common dolphins just a few miles offshore. It has been fantastic to hear of these sightings and also to see the smaller groups of bottlenose dolphins in the shallow coastal waters, after all the bycatch problems we usually see at this time of year. There have also been several sightings of fin whales a few miles offshore. However, Colin Speedie who has been researching our local marine life for many years suggests the super-pods are not unusual. He has reported seeing large numbers of dolphins regularly in our waters over previous years.

In the first week of December 2003 there was a live bottlenose whale semi-stranded in Plymouth. The whale was in very shallow water and it was feared that it may beach. Volunteer medics from British Divers were put on standby throughout Devon and Cornwall, but thankfully the whale aided itself back out into the deeper water.

As part of the research and training project that we carry out here in Cornwall we are running two cetacean identification courses with the Cornwall Mammal Group on Saturday 6th March 1.30 pm to 5.30 pm at Five Acres Allet, near Truro, and Saturday 3rd April, 1.30 pm to 5.30 pm at the Silver Dolphin Centre, Porthleven.

The number of dead cetaceans washing ashore along the Cornish coast in 2003 was again higher than in previous years. The total number found and recorded by volunteers amounted to 254 by the end of 2003. It has been

suggested that for every one found, there are at least ten unseen, either still at sea or washed in on remote areas of the shore never visited.

The start of 2004 has shown that, again, new record numbers may be recorded this year, with over 102 strandings by mid February. The majority of the dead strandings so far during 2004 are harbour porpoise and many of these have been recorded in the St Austell Bay area. In 2003, the majority of the records were common dolphins coming ashore around the Lizard.

Here at the Silver Dolphin Centre in Porthleven, we coordinate the south west Cornwall group of British Divers Marine Life Rescue. On Saturday 13th March, there will be a medic course running for anyone who wishes to become trained in marine life rescue. There is also a mass stranding exercise the next day, 14th March. Both the course and the training day will be run in the Porthleven and Mounts Bay area, and anyone requiring further information can contact David on 01326 572002.

We have started a photographic identification programme for dolphins in Cornish waters. In January 2004, the centre started collating identification pictures to help update previous records. So if anyone has any pictures that they feel may be of use for the Cornish records, please contact David Ball on 01326 572002 or e-mail conservation@silverdolphin.freeserve.co.uk

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