

## The Cetacean Monitoring Unit

# Sea Watch foundation



Harbour porpoise, M.E. Baines/SWF

## Dates for your new 2006 diaries! National Whale and Dolphin Watch Week 2006 Saturday August 12 – Sunday 21

By setting the date early for the next National Whale and Dolphin Watch (NWDW) Week, we hope to be able to increase the numbers of manned sites around the country where members of the public can join in with our trained volunteer watchers. Please contact us at [info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk) if you would like information on how to organise or take part in a watch during the week. We are interested to hear from those of you involved in publishing, to help us publicise NWDW week as much as possible. If you would like to develop article and feature ideas, please contact either Wendy Nectar on 01926 421679, or Clare Dickins on 07766 587240, who would be happy to help you and can provide a range of high quality photographs from our extensive photo library. We will keep you informed as the week draws nearer, but keep an eye on <http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk> for the latest news

## Cetacean Survey Training Courses in New Quay, West Wales June - September 2006

*Book now to join a short course to learn all about British cetaceans, how to survey for them, and contribute to their conservation!*

In 2006, the Sea Watch Foundation hopes to run two types of cetacean survey training course: a weekend course for those with little previous knowledge or experience of cetaceans; and an extended 4-day course for those who already have some knowledge of cetacean watching. The introductory weekend courses will be 24th-25th June, 15th-16th July, and 5th-6th August 2006, and the cost will be £150 for organisations and £120 for individuals. The extended 4-day course will be 2nd -5th September 2006 and will cost £200 for organisations or £170 for individuals.

### Editorial

Welcome to the final installment of the Sea Watch Foundation news sheet for 2005. It has been quite a remarkable year for cetacean sightings in UK waters, highlighted by the success of National Whale and Dolphin Watch (NWDW) Week 2005 during August, in which we received more than 500 separate sightings of nine species, including a group of six fin whales observed off the coast of Pembrokeshire. The SWF training courses that took place this year were fully booked and very successful, so thank you to every one that took part in those. We would like to make NWDW week and our training courses even more successful in 2006, hence the advance warning (details below)! On behalf of SWF I would like to thank all our regional coordinators, sightings contributors and supporters for your input and support in 2005 and I would like to personally thank all the contributors to the SWF news sheets for your correspondence, contributions, and encouragement. With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year, and wishing you happy sea watching in 2006.

Best wishes, Lori.



Prices exclude accommodation and meals, and discounts are available on both courses (contact us for details). Both courses will consist of illustrated lectures and video presentations on conservation issues facing UK cetaceans, species identification, and recommended survey methods for monitoring cetaceans, as well as headland watches and boat surveys that will allow participants to directly learn how to conduct systematic watches and fill in standardised recording forms. Courses will be based at New Quay, Ceredigion, West Wales, and will be taught by experienced and enthusiastic staff from the Sea Watch Foundation. For more information, please contact us at:

The Sea Watch Foundation, Paragon House, Wellington Place, New Quay, Ceredigion SA45 9NR, Wales; Tel/Fax: 01545-561227, <<http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk>>, or <[info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk)>.

## **October - November highlights**

**By Lori Handley**

Despite really awful weather including blizzards in South West England and gales and storms elsewhere, we have still received interesting sightings reports this period. Bottlenose dolphins continued to be seen in fairly high numbers around the coast, particularly in Grampian, the Hebrides, and South West England. Several young bottlenose calves have been reported off the Isle of Mull, Grampian and Cornwall. Fewer minke whales have been reported than in previous months, except off North East Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, continuing the relatively poor year for minke compared to previous years. Harbour porpoise were seen fairly regularly, particularly in Devon and Cornwall. On an exceptional day, Kevin Hepworth (regional coordinator for South Grampian) was fortunate enough to witness 70-90 harbour porpoise traveling north past Collieston, north of Aberdeen, at the start of October. Small numbers of orcas were seen off the Isle of Man and off Cornwall, where they were potentially interacting with bottlenose dolphins. Fin whales continued to be seen off the Republic of Ireland, which also reported a beaked whale sighting off County Sligo and a stranded pygmy sperm whale. Several other reports of strandings were received, particularly from the south coast of England, as is quite common at this time of year.

In addition to our sightings, a highlight of this period was a meeting of several of the regional coordinators, Sea Watch staff and trustees in New Quay, West Wales, on October 22nd-23rd. We were treated to a diverse array of presentations including, from staff, a review of SWF's scientific work from Peter Evans, developments in the SWF database (Mick Baines), a report of this year's National Whale & Dolphin Watch, (Hanna Nuutila), our educational programme in Wales (Helen Bates), and the ecology of Hebridean minke whales (Pia Anderwald). In addition, it was great to hear about the valuable work being carried out by our regional coordinators from Sussex (Steve Savage), Eastern England (Andy Tait, Robin Petch), and the Isle of Man (John Galpin), and to find out more about logistics of surveying in each of these areas. It was a great opportunity to catch up and in some cases to finally put names to faces, as well as to see a beautiful part of the country and of course no trip to New Quay would be complete without some time spent watching the resident bottlenose dolphins – who didn't disappoint. I could even see them in the harbour from my hotel window on the Sunday morning! We hope to organise similar meetings in the near future – perhaps in Scotland in the hope that we can accommodate our Scottish coordinators. More details to follow. On behalf of all the attendees of the meeting, I would like to thank Hanna and Peter in particular for all their hard work in organizing the Event.

Please send your raw sightings data to Hanna Nuutila, Sea Watch Foundation sightings coordinator, at: <[hanna.nuutila@seawatchfoundation.org.uk](mailto:hanna.nuutila@seawatchfoundation.org.uk)>

## **Regional Roundup October to November 2005**

### **Orkney Islands**

**From Chris Booth, regional coordinator for Orkney and North Scotland**

There is very little to report from Orkney for October and November. Winds have been rather strong throughout the period making watching rather difficult but there are the following records:

One minke whale was seen off Deerness on 11th October. There was also a stranding of an unidentified? whale that had been dead for several days, near Holm on 8th October. Two to three harbour porpoise were seen off Deerness on 11th October, and a dead porpoise stranded on Sanday on 27th October. Two Risso's dolphins were seen in Scapa Flow on 15th October. Finally there were two reports of basking sharks in October.

**Northern Scotland: Moray Firth****From Howard Hartley Loates, regional coordinator, (Sutors of Cromarty to Kessock/Inverness)**

Nothing to report from this neck of the woods. The only two occasions I have been out were both blank. – maybe simply omit this report.

**North East Scotland****From Iain Macdonald, regional coordinator for North East Scotland (Nigg-Duncansby Head)***October highlights*

The month started with a small spate of porpoise sightings. Relatively large numbers were seen off Strathsteven, Sutherland with 29, including four juveniles, on 11th October and a minimum of 17 seen on 14th October. Smaller numbers were seen off Lybster, Caithness with a minimum of six on 1st, six on 2nd, two on 3rd, a minimum of six on 22nd and six on 29th. Four porpoises were seen off Whaligoe Steps, near Wick, on 4th, whilst just “round the corner” from North East Scotland, three porpoises were seen at Gills Bay, Caithness on 24th.

October, which is generally one of the best months along the north shore of the Moray Firth for seeing large numbers of feeding kittiwake and the occasional minke whale, produced few of the former and a scattering of the latter. Minke whales reported were a single adult off Lybster on 2nd, an adult glimpsed off Lybster on the 3rd, an adult off Whaligoe Steps on 4th, two adults plus one sub-adult off Strathsteven on the 14th, and an adult of Tarbat Ness on 22nd October. On 14th October, the sub-adult was seen moving with one of the adults, but keeping a few tens of metres distance between them. The sightings off Whaligoe Steps on the 4th started well. While chatting to a friend in her garden, Colin Bird glanced over her shoulder and spotted a minke whale in the sea below! This was followed about an hour later by a sighting of possibly the same animal. An unidentified large cetacean seen off Whaligoe Steps on 4th October by Colin could have been another minke whale or the same minke whale as seen earlier, but the sighting was too brief for Colin to be confident about the identification.

The highlight of the month was a group of five Atlantic white-sided dolphins seen off Lybster on the 2nd. The dolphins were watched breaching and splashing at the surface. A single white-sided dolphin was also seen off Lybster on 6th October. In the midst of a successful watch for autumn skuas on 19th October, Dean MacAskill saw 20 bottlenose dolphins moving close to the rocks off Tarbat Ness lighthouse, Ross-shire. Also viewed from Tarbat Ness, but much further off-shore on 22nd were three groups of bottlenose dolphins comprising 8 + 8 + 6 animals. The group of six included one sub-adult. The three groups were watched for about 30 minutes and appeared to be fishing, each group about 1 km from the other. The most distant group was off the village of Embo in Sutherland, often a good spot for porpoise.

*November highlights*

With days becoming shorter and not the best weather in the world, the number of sightings started to drop. Off Lybster, three porpoises were seen on 13th and two were spotted on 28th. From Strathsteven, 12 porpoises were seen in a single group, feeding not far from a small number of little auks on the 19th. The next day, two porpoises were seen at the same site swimming at high speed. A large cetacean off Lybster on 19th was recorded as unidentified, but it was certainly a large animal. Finally, two bottlenose dolphins were seen off Nigg, Ross-shire on the 6th.

**Grampian****From Peter MacDonald, regional coordinator for North Grampian**

As ever, the sightings took a tumble at this time of year. Lack of food in the Firth and of course the weather, played a major part. It takes a brave person to stand at the head of a cliff or pier for a few hours in the hope of seeing a cetacean while holding on to a ladder or rope as a gale rips through the place!

Still, October was pretty good for sightings of bottlenose dolphins with over 145 dolphins recorded along the coast. Bottlenose dolphins were encountered from Fraserburgh to Inverness on fifteen days out of the month. Harbour porpoises were recorded on five days, with nine animals recorded. On the 3rd, a sperm whale was seen off Fraserburgh, and we received two sightings of minke whale on the 2nd and the 23rd of the month.

On the 5th and 6th November, a group of 30+ bottlenose dolphins passed by Findochty. Over at Fort George and Cromarty, dolphins were seen on the 6th, 15th and 19th. November was a really bad month for sightings mainly due to the weather. It rained virtually all month and when it stopped it was cold and windy. Also the first big snow of the year came and blew us all to the fireside with cups of tea and watching videos!

During the past few months, I have been out and about at various events, for example a great craft fair and a dolphin weekend at Buckie Library, at which we received lots of interest and great artwork from both kids and adults.

### **South Grampian**

#### **From Kevin Hepworth, regional coordinator for South Grampian.**

During October, we received 29 reported sightings of bottlenose dolphins, split between Aberdeen Harbour, Montrose and Stonehaven, but with a bias towards Aberdeen. A group of 50+ were observed heading north past Johnshaven on the 21st October. Another 'supergroup' of 80+ was then reported on the 25th October off Stonehaven. Average group sizes were 8-15 animals, with a fair proportion of small juveniles and calves (generally two to three out of eight and four to five out of 15 animals). Only 15 reported sightings were received of bottlenose in November, mainly around Aberdeen Harbour and Stonehaven, which is a reflection of poor watching conditions (high seas, blizzards and dark by 4 pm) rather than lack of activity.

I received 22 reports of harbour porpoise in October. During a fantastic day on the 2nd October, I witnessed between 70-90 animals traveling north past Collieston. Some individuals, seen after 9.30 am may have been animals returning south, but the first hour of the watch was a stream of animals heading north. With this exception, group sizes were generally of two to six animals. Three reports for November were received of single animals from Collieston, Girdleness, and Stonehaven. Finally, two whales, reported from Lunan Bay on 23rd November were probably minke.

### **South West Scotland and Inner Hebrides**

#### **by Colin McFadyen (volunteer) and Laura Mandleberg (sightings officer), Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust.**

##### *October*

Due to the end of the tourist season, the west coast has experienced its usual accelerated downturn in sighting reports. There were four sightings of bottlenose dolphins throughout October, all of which were around the Mull coastline. The first two sightings, which were both in the first half of the month, reported similar group sizes (12-15 individuals). Two calves were seen with this second group off the West coast of Mull. The following day, a larger group of dolphins (25-30 individuals), once again with two calves, appeared in the Sound of Mull. This time, observers were close enough to see foetal folds on the calves indicating that the calves were newborns. The last sighting of bottlenose dolphins for this month was a group of approximately eight animals in the Mallaig area. There were two reported sightings of minke whales in October. The first sighting was a single adult seen feeding in Rothesay Bay, gathering much interest from the local bird life, and the Isle of Bute ferry crew! The second whale was spotted north of Iona.

##### *November*

There were only four sightings reported in November, all of which were of bottlenose dolphins. At the beginning of the month, 20 dolphins including six juveniles/calves were spotted playing and moving through the Kilbrannan Sound, West of Arran. A solitary dolphin was observed in the mouth of Loch Nevis jumping and playing before swimming out of the area. Dolphins were back in the Sound of Mull again by mid-November, with a group of 12-15 individuals seen playing wildly off the Mull shores by local residents. Again, there were two calves seen with this group – possibly the same calves seen a month earlier? The following day, lively and playful dolphins were seen by many observers around the Fort William area. Reports described a group of 25-30 dolphins (including mother/calf pairs) playing and travelling in the area for several hours. This same group entertained the crew onboard the Corran Ferry for over an hour as they took the ferry up to Fort William for repairs!

This summer, a central ID catalogue for the Hebridean bottlenose dolphin images was established. After thorough analysis of hundreds of ID shots of dorsal fins, 63 different individuals were identified. Further study and continued analysis of our growing Photo-ID catalogue will help determine the population size and home-ranges of the Hebridean bottlenose dolphins.

As the main season draws to a close, we have been able to start processing the data gathered throughout the year. The pattern below jumped to our attention. Understandably, sperm whale sightings have been few and far between in our database in previous years. Being a deep-diving species, they are usually found much further offshore (off the edge of the continental shelf). However, for the past two years we have received several sightings of sperm whales (five in 2005 and two in 2004). Out of this year's five sighting reports, several have been attributed to the same

animal, indicating that the individual/s remained in the Minch area for up to three months. If this is the case, it would be the first time a sperm whale has been reported staying in our coastal waters for this length of time. – this is all a bit speculative without clearly recognisable individuals being identified repeatedly.

### **North east England**

#### **From Andy Tait, regional coordinator for Northumberland, Tyne and Wear,**

October sightings for this area began on the 3rd with one porpoise foraging off Lizard Point at lunchtime, and a further porpoise off the reef at Cresswell early evening before the light went! The following afternoon, two porpoises were seen feeding in Druridge Bay. There was only one further sighting in the month; on the 31<sup>st</sup>, a single bottlenose dolphin was seen in the River Tyne by a father and son fishing from a small boat, who apparently mistook it for a shark, but photographs confirmed it as a dolphin playing around the boat. On the 1st of November, three porpoises were seen foraging only 50 m off the reef at Cresswell. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, a further sighting of the bottlenose dolphin in Tynemouth was reported, this time swimming between the piers at the mouth of the River Tyne. One porpoise was seen heading east on the morning of the 8th off Lizard Point. The next sighting was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November, with a single porpoise seen heading north off Lizard Point again on a very rough afternoon with heavy swells.

### **Eastern England and East Anglia**

#### **From Mark Iley, Essex Wildlife Trust**

It has been a quiet few months in Essex coastal waters and the wider Thames Estuary. Between October and November, we received only two cetacean sightings. On the 9th October, a pilot whale was observed from a local charter boat at Black Deep. The whale was estimated to be 25 feet in length. The observers had quite an extended view of the whale and presumed it was feeding. The same weekend, a commercial boat saw (presumably) the same whale near the Wallet Spitway. A porpoise was seen on the 20th October at Blackwater near Bradwell power station Baffle Wall. In addition, a 'small whale' was reported from Kent waters on the 25th September. The observer saw 8-9 feet of back above the surface. The drawing provided emphasises no dorsal fin, and the animal showed on the surface for about 20 seconds before disappearing. – not sure what this was! We should chase it up.

### **Thames Estuary (Shoeburyness, Essex to Sheerness, Kent)**

#### **From Renata Kowalik, Thames Marine Mammals Sightings Survey, Marine & Freshwater Conservation Programme, Zoological Society of London**

No cetacean sightings were reported in this area, but during October and November we received a total of twelve sightings of common and grey seal. One common seal was seen as far upstream as Kew Gardens on 15th October. However, the majority of sightings over this period covered the Limehouse, Canary Wharf and Isle of Dogs stretch of the river, and further out in the estuary around Blyth Sands where the seals were mostly seen resting on the sands.

### **Southern England**

#### **From Stephen Savage, regional coordinator for Sussex**

A quiet time for us in Sussex as cetacean sightings are very rare at this time of the year. We have continued to search for further sightings information regarding the Selsey dolphins. This has also led to a new source of sightings for the future, the Selsey Wildlife Officer, who is keen to report and receive information on Sussex sea mammal sightings. On 25th November, a 1m harbour porpoise was washed up dead on Brighton Beach.

We have received a couple of common seal reports. The first report was of a common seal near Lewes in East Sussex. The animal was originally reported as injured and was attended by British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR), but it turned out to be fit and healthy. The seal was seen at Southease Bridge just south of Lewes, which is almost 3 miles inland. Medics monitored the seal for over three hours, and on several occasions the seal swam off into the river and then back to the slipway. A common seal has also been reported throughout November and early December west of St Leonards in East Sussex. It is not uncommon that reports of seals by the public are usually described as sick or injured because people are surprised to see them on the beach and assume there is something wrong with them. We will often check out seal reports to assess the situation, and then report to BDMLR or Southern Marine Life Rescue (SMLR) if further action is needed. Most of the time they are fit and healthy juveniles that wander as far as our coast. The furthest report so far for a seal in a Sussex river has been just above Arundel in West Sussex.

The 15th November saw the opening of a strandline exhibition that I have been working on in Brighton as education coordinator of the River Ocean Foundation. The exhibition, produced in partnership with the Booth Museum, covered a wide variety of themes linked to the strandline, ranging from the objects themselves to forces that create the strandline, marine litter, marvellous eggs and myth and folklore. A large section was also put together on marine mammals strandings. This largely focused on reasons why marine mammals might strand and the things that scientists can learn by studying these stranded animals both in terms of natural history and conservation.

### **South West England – Dorset**

#### **From Jo Wharam, Durlston Marine Project**

Bottlenose dolphins were seen throughout October and November. In October, we received four sightings of a single dolphin off Old Harry and in the entrance to Yarmouth Harbour. Dolphins were seen on eight days during November in Southampton Water, Cowes (Isle of Wight), Dancing Ledge, St. Aldhelm's Head, Poole Harbour, Anvil Point, at the observation point and off Tilly Whim Caves, Durlston. All sightings during November were of one to three animals. I have a feeling that the single bottlenose seen in Southampton Water is the same one seen around the Isle of Wight. We had three dead pilot whales wash up on Charmouth, Chesil and Osmington beaches in early November, all reported in the space of a week. The Chesil one was a youngster, the one at Osmington a pretty much fully grown female. I did not get a look at the one at Charmouth but someone took the head pretty quickly! My hunch is that they were all from the same pod and the female and young possibly related. I'm off to the Natural History Museum next week to meet with Richard Sabin who runs the Strandings Scheme and hope to be able to collect more info from strandings in the future.

### **South West England – Devon**

#### **From Gavin Black, Dolphin Protection Programme (DPP) Officer, Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT)**

October and November have been quiet months in Devon as far as sightings go. Although there were no confirmed sightings of bottlenose dolphins at all in the county, there were a couple of unidentified dolphins reported, which are likely to have been bottlenose. These animals were seen in the first week of October in Barnstaple/Bideford Bay. Harbour porpoises were seen off both coasts; regularly off the north coast around Baggy Point, and twice off Berry Head, Brixham on the south coast. Six common dolphins were spotted close inshore off Seaton in East Devon. This is an area from which we receive few cetacean sightings. There were three dead strandings this month: a common dolphin in Hartland and a pilot whale and a porpoise in Teignbridge. All washed up in October, and, unfortunately, due to state of decomposition, none were removed for autopsy. Sadly the strandings are continuing, coming ashore with the strong south-westerlies.

On a more positive note, Devon Wildlife Trust's Dolphin Protection Programme is progressing well and has recruited more than 60 volunteers to carry out regular Sea Watch Foundation surveys from the coast. October saw the first basic training session, where 26 volunteers were given the essentials to carry out surveys on the North Devon coast. Despite some horrible weather, they have been getting out on calmer days, and have been having some good, and regular, sightings of porpoise.

### **South West England - Cornwall**

#### **From David Ball, Silver Dolphin Centre, Porthleven**

October has seen the continued presence of the bottlenose dolphin pod still seen around the Cornish coast. They have been on both the north and south coasts, and reported on at least nine days of the month, which is good for this time of the year when the weather is not at its best. In the first week of the month, a pod of 35 common dolphins was seen, including several juveniles, and then a super pod of around 300 common dolphins was also reported by Orca Seafaris off Falmouth. There has also been one sighting of a pod of 25 harbour porpoises on the north coast.

Our work with cetaceans continues to attract a great deal of interest. We ran a one-day course in October for a Conexions group. These are youngsters who have left school with no qualifications and need support. They all had a great time learning how to look after our inflatable dolphin. This was followed by a visit of 25 Austrian students who stayed with us for two weeks. These students had no idea of the amount of bycatch that is washed up on our coast. Despite bad weather, we managed to get them out on a couple of boat trips with Orca Seafaris but we didn't see any dolphins.

November started well with a report of an orca spotted near Perranporth on the north coast interacting with six bottlenose dolphins. The dolphins were said to be distressed at the time. Bottlenose dolphins have again been the main cetacean spotted in Cornish waters; reported on seven days of the month. Some of the sightings again included calves. It will be interesting to compare our records with those of Devon, Dorset and Biscay to see if the number of reported calves is on the increase. On the 8th of November, we received a call out at the Centre from workers in the local dry dock to say that a dolphin was swimming in the harbour. Since it is opposite our premises, I ran round to see what it was. Unfortunately it was a large male bottlenose that had stranded live and then died on the harbour slip. It was in a poor condition and looked emaciated and was taken for an autopsy. I attended as our Centre coordinates the Cornish Marine Life Rescue group, but we were not needed as there were medics from British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) on the scene, and the animal was dead... There has also been a couple of sightings of harbour porpoise: one pod of 15 was seen in Mounts Bay. Some observers have seen calves in the pods. We have been talking to some of the local boat operators about getting more people out on the water to make sightings reports. Some boats have even offered us free places for volunteers during their quiet time of the year, which is just the sort of cooperation and support we need to promote.

**From Dan Jarvis, Cornwall Wildlife Trust.  
(information reproduced with permission of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust).**

Now that the winter weather has moved in, sightings have been predictably few compared to the last few months, due to less people being around and poorer weather. However, dead seals and cetaceans have started washing ashore as is usual at this time of year, which Cornwall Wildlife Trust Strandings Network (<<http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk>>) volunteers are busy dealing with. These have included two striped dolphins, one on the north coast and one on the south. Unfortunately, the latter animal was too decomposed to be taken for post mortem examination, but the first animal, which washed up on October 14th, was examined and found to have been yet another bycatch victim. Incidentally, the decomposed dolphin happened to wash up on the same day as at least two other dead cetaceans at nearby Penzance.

Seal pups, both dead and alive, have also been coming ashore with at least five dead pups in the space of two weeks at the end of November. Fortunately, the National Seal Sanctuary (<<http://www.sealsanctuary.co.uk>>) hasn't been as inundated as last year, and currently 13 pups are being cared for; a further 2 sadly died. On a happier note though, the first three to be rescued in the 2005-6 season, back in early summer, were successfully released in October and November, along with the last one of the 2004-5 season. There has only been one live stranding during this period. Unusually this was a bottlenose dolphin and a team of Marine Mammal Medics from British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDLMR, <<http://www.bdmlr.org.uk>>) were called to Penzance harbour, where the animal was apparently trapped in shallow water. Bottlenose dolphins very rarely live strand, but whenever they do they are invariably in poor condition, this being no exception. Medics observed the animal to be in very poor state and with superficial injuries to its beak and tail stock. It was swimming weakly around the harbour, making attempts to strand itself by the harbour wall, eventually succeeding by beaching on a slipway. Medics were positioned to support the animal, a male measuring over 3 metres in length, while a veterinarian was en route to examine the animal. However, upon stranding, it convulsed once and died almost instantaneously. The body was sent for post mortem examination and we wait with interest for the findings.

Finally, the West Cornwall Seal Group (<<http://www.suess seals.eclipse.co.uk>>) has recently recorded annual site fidelity in two breeding adults, a male and a female, at one colony, which has been quite an exciting development! There has also been a sighting of an adult female seal known as 'Wriggle' who gave birth this time last year in the same location as she has now been seen. The Group is waiting with anticipation for developments to see if she also gives birth this year.

Now for the sightings... beginning with the one exceptional sighting of a single leatherback turtle off St Ives on 1st October. The only other rare sighting occurred during early November when a common seal was spotted hauled out on a slipway in St Ives harbour. National Seal Sanctuary staff and BDMLR medics attended and found it to be in good condition with a couple of minor scratches, and so it was allowed to go back into the water. Common seals are very rarely seen in the South West, but this year there have been at least four confirmed sightings in Devon and Cornwall. Harbour porpoises have been very scarce, but a large pod of 25 was seen off Trevean on October 30th, while smaller pods were seen in Mount's Bay and off Lamorna in November. A pod of nine was also seen heading north-east off Boscastle on 22nd November, with an estimated 250 common dolphins nearby, heading in the same direction but further out to sea. These were followed at some distance by a school of 13 bottlenose dolphins – what a great day out! Small pods of porpoises were also present in Fal Bay during October, along with a mother and calf

pair of Risso's dolphins, which were also seen that month in the same location. Common dolphins have also been fairly infrequently seen, but there were around 300 of them between Falmouth and the Manacles reef on the Lizard Peninsula on October 8th, although they were not reported again. Commons were also spotted elsewhere in Fal Bay, and at the end of November in Mount's Bay. This school included one animal with a deformed dorsal fin (similar to 'Benty', the bottlenose dolphin).

Pods of unidentified dolphins were seen off the Lizard, Chapel Porth and the Carracks, west of St Ives. On that note, St Ives Bay has once again had numerous sightings of bottlenose dolphins, with repeated reports of what is thought to be the same school over the course of a week within the bay at the end of October, favouring the usual areas off St Ives, Carbis Bay and Hayle, with one sighting of them off Godrevy at the eastern end of the bay as well. Pods were also seen off Falmouth, the Helford River, Penzance, St Agnes, Newquay and Perranporth. This final sighting at Perranporth is of significant interest as a school of five or six large grey dolphins was seen moving quickly with much excitement at the surface, followed by an orca (the first sighting of one since May). The orca appeared to be in pursuit, and the whole group was last seen heading north at speed. This incident took place on November 2nd.

We have also received new reports that there were large groups of basking sharks off the North Cornwall coast during the summer, which would tend to support the identification of at least 12 off Boscastle in July. However, there have been none reported to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust since the last Sea Watch Foundation newsletter was issued.

With the deterioration of the weather, there have been few events during this period. The Cornwall Wildlife Trust Strandings Network Forum had to be postponed due to the heavy snowfall towards the end of November, which caused chaos on Cornish roads. Two BDMLR Marine Mammal Medic courses have taken place, one in October and one in November, with the last one of the year to take place on December 3rd at Crackington Haven, near Bude, on the north coast. The West Cornwall Seal Group has held 'Walks and Talks' for local groups, the National Trust, and University of Cornwall students, which, despite some unsettled weather, were very successful with several seals spotted, a feeding mother and pup seen at the former, and some enjoyable days out on the cliffs.

Here are those all important local emergency contact numbers:

For live seals, call the **National Seal Sanctuary** on 01326 221361.

People are warned to not approach or handle any seals that they may find on the beach due to the danger of being bitten and subsequent risk of infection.

For dead cetaceans, seals etc, call the **Cornwall Wildlife Trust** hotline on 0845 2012626.

People are advised not to touch carcasses due to the risk of infection.

For live cetaceans in distress, call **British Divers Marine Life Rescue** on 01825 765546.

People are advised not to immediately return animals to the water, but to keep the animal upright and wet, avoiding getting water in the blowhole, until a thorough health check can be made by trained medics and veterinarians.

## **Wales**

### **From Hanna Nuuttila, sightings coordinator, Sea Watch Foundation Wales.**

At New Quay in Cardigan Bay, we still had quite a few bottlenose dolphins seen in October, and some great encounters right inshore, close to the harbour wall. In November however we experienced a significant decrease in numbers of dolphins in the bay. The weather has been poor but there have been a few sightings of porpoises closer inshore during the last week of November, and two porpoises were spotted very close to the RNLI rib on the 4th December at Castell Bach.

Further south, off Pembrokeshire, our November (17<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>) line-transect surveys revealed good numbers of common dolphins mainly in the southern sector of the Celtic Deep, with smaller numbers of harbour porpoise. A minke whale was also seen on 21<sup>st</sup>.

In North Wales, a small group of common dolphins southwest of Trwyn Maen Melyn on the Lleyn Peninsula was sighted on 3rd October, and a group of 20 bottlenose dolphins off Anglesey on the 7th. Twelve bottlenose were also seen from the headland of Penmon Point, Anglesey on 12th November. On 23rd October, six long-finned pilot whales were seen 10 miles north of Anglesey, and 12 bottlenose dolphins were seen off Penmon Point, South-east Anglesey on 12th November.

### **Isle of Man**

#### **From John Galpin, regional coordinator for the Isle of Man**

In the week beginning 3rd October, a fisherman reported three orcas near the coast, just south of Douglas. They were spotted in the water below the massive Victorian archway sited on Marine Drive. On the 15th of October, Steve Black saw two bottlenose dolphins while walking the coastal footpath at Bradda Head, a prominent headland in the south-west of the island. He watched them swim around Bradda Head and into the bay at Port Erin. The persistent strong winds, mainly from the north, resulted in no watches whatsoever in October and only three watches in November, none of which yielded sightings. With little or nothing to report on cetaceans, I thought some information on other visitors and residents of Ballaquane might enlighten a dark winter's evening.

The occasional visiting barn owl has been augmented by the arrival of a short-eared owl, which can often be seen feeding around the farm, sometimes spied standing bolt upright amongst the rough grass. Together with resident hen harriers, peregrines, sparrowhawks and kestrels, even watches without cetaceans are to be enjoyed. Still on a bird theme, a pair of choughs has adopted our tractor shed as their night-time roost. There are over 400 choughs resident in the Isle of Man, accounting for about half the entire population of the British Isles. For the last few years we have worked to restore the coastal pastures, and this has resulted in two pairs of choughs returning to our cliffs to breed. Our new shed dwellers were probably born and raised on the farm and, since pairing up in August, have spent much of the late summer around the farmhouse, entertaining us with their extreme aerobatics and general joie de vivre. With much noise and commotion they arrive home each evening about 1600 hours and roost on the steel girders. They are thought to be a 'prospecting pair' looking to establish a permanent nest site. To encourage them, a newly constructed 'cliff-face' ledge has been provided in the top of the furthest eave. It is hoped that this ledge will be considered a fit and proper home for them to rear their young. As I write, they are circling the farmhouse screeching their wonderful "cheeoow", in preparation to settle down for the night. Each morning, around 8 o'clock, they leave and join others to forage on the cliffs, foreshore and strandline.

With luck, there will be more cetacean news to relate in the next newsletter. December and January have often surprised us with some spectacular sightings and displays, and if repeated this year would be a most welcome sight.

### **Republic of Ireland**

#### **From Pádraig Whooley, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group sightings coordinator**

**Fin whale:** Fin whales were encountered on 18 occasions during this period, a small increase on the previous two month period. Of these, 13 encounters were from County Cork and the remaining five from County Waterford. Group size ranged from 1-10. The general feeling is that activity was beginning to increase towards late November, which produced simultaneous, daily sightings of fin whales from several watch sites. There were an additional 12 sightings of large baleen whale species, many of which were reported as fin whales, but were subsequently downgraded on validation. But in the absence of any evidence to suggest the arrival of the humpback whales in this area, it can only be assumed that most of these were also fin whales.

**Humpback whale:** There were just two sightings of a single humpback whale #HBIRL3 in West Cork. We note that this time last year we had photographed six individuals along the Irish south coast in this period. We remain optimistic that the humpbacks that were observed in West Cork in November 2004 will return in December 2005.

**Minke whale:** There were 24 encounters of 46 minke whales recorded. Again all sightings, bar one, were from those sites where watch effort was maintained, namely Sleah Head (County Kerry), and West Cork. This reduction in sightings likely reflects lower observer effort, and their seasonal distribution, as they are more frequently observed in late spring and throughout summer in Irish waters.

**Common dolphin:** There were 29 sightings of 676 animals; all bar one of which were from Counties Cork or Waterford. On several encounters, they were observed feeding in association with fin whales.

**Bottlenose dolphin:** There were 16 encounters of 136 animals, with a mean group size of 8.5. With the exception of the harbour porpoise, they were the only species widely distributed, with sightings reported from all areas, bar the north Irish coast.

**Risso's dolphin:** There were three sightings of 10 animals, all of which were from the West Cork or Waterford coast.

**Beaked whale species:** Perhaps the most bizarre sighting was of a beaked whale on 3rd November from Killala Bay, County Sligo. It was filmed swimming in very shallow waters at Enniscrone, and at one point swam into the pier, damaging its beak. Despite the poor quality of the footage, we are confident that it was a *Mesoplodon* species, and most likely a Sowerby's beaked whale. Subsequent searches in the area failed to show that it stranded.

**Pygmy Sperm whale:** Without question, the most unusual Irish stranding was of a pygmy sperm whale in Ballyheigue, County Kerry on 22nd November. This is one of the rarest cetacean species in Irish waters, and is only the sixth stranding record. It was positively identified by photographs forwarded to IWDG. Unfortunately, the animal, whose fresh condition suggests it may have initially live-stranded, was buried by Kerry County Council. But given the potential significance of this event, the IWDG requested the exhumation of the carcass, which was successfully retrieved. Preliminary examination show it to be an immature female, and the skeleton is being prepared by IWDG.



Stranded pygmy sperm whale,  
Sinead Hussey

Comprehensive analysis of all Irish cetacean sightings is available through the IWDG website [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie), which provides on line access and interrogation of over 7,000 validated sightings

**Sea Watch Foundation's project "Encouraging Public Participation in Cetacean Monitoring" is supported by Heritage Lottery Fund as well as Defra's Environmental Action Fund. Furthermore, Sea Watch is also supported by BG International, Dong Efterforskning og Produktion and Atlantic Petroleum, and the Countryside Council for Wales.**

**Further details on all our activities can be found on the Sea Watch Foundation website ([www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk](http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk)), by e-mailing [info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk) or by calling Sea Watch on 01865 717276.**