

## The Cetacean Monitoring Unit

# Sea Watch foundation



Photo: Northern bottlenose whale, *S. Hooker*, SWF

## Wanted – Enthusiastic cetacean spotters to brave the cold, rain and winds!

Firstly, I would like to thank all the SWF regional coordinators, volunteers, members and supporters for your continuous efforts and hard work, for recording and reporting your sightings, for visiting the website and generally spreading cetacean awareness across the country.

Those of you (and you know who you are...) who have been sending in sighting and effort forms throughout the autumn and winter months I cannot express my gratitude enough! I do hope that your enthusiasm and passion for watching doesn't fade and that the distant dream of summer will keep you going! However, I am always looking for new observers, new watch sites, and more regular watches at the most popular sites. So if you haven't yet done a watch this year or if you know of anyone who might be able to come along and join you – grab those binoculars, print a form and get out there. It can be biting cold but you might well be rewarded by a surprisingly joyful harbour porpoise or two, or a group of six bottlenose dolphins like we just did in Cardigan Bay!

In addition, I would like to stress to anyone who would like to take part in the National Whale and Dolphin Watch (Saturday 12th – Sunday 21st August 2006) and join an experienced watcher or set up their own watch, please do get in touch! No previous experience required!

If you want to know more, including what to do, where to go and where to get the forms, call me on 01545 561 227, or email me at [hanna.nuuttila@seawatchfoundation.org.uk](mailto:hanna.nuuttila@seawatchfoundation.org.uk).

**Hanna Nuuttila**

### Editorial

Welcome to the first Sea Watch Foundation newssheet of 2006, covering December 2005 and January 2006. In spite of the number of sightings being fairly low at this time of year, it has been quite an interesting couple of months, with high profile media coverage of a northern bottlenose whale in the River Thames and a bottlenose dolphin in Maryport Harbour, and details of both can be found in this edition of the news sheet. I'd like to echo Hanna's sentiments (see below) and say thank you to everyone who has braved the weather and carried on recording their sightings throughout the winter months, and to the newssheet's contributors for providing interesting reports despite cetacean records being relatively few and far between. All the best for 2006,

Lori

**Lori Handley**



## Northern bottlenose whale in the River Thames

Just after midday on Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> January, the Port of London Authority telephoned us to report a whale swimming in the Thames Estuary on the south side of the Thames Barrier near Ford's Jetty, Dagenham, Kent. The observer, Martin Pattison, described it as about 20 feet long, dark grey, with a rounded dorsal fin slightly forward of the centre of the back, and surfacing slowly before diving. On the basis of the length estimate, we suggested four options: minke whale, northern bottlenose whale, long-finned pilot whale, and killer whale (but we felt the last was unlikely from the description). The description of the position and shape of the fin actually fitted pilot whale closest (a cautionary point that observers don't always describe accurately what they see). However, we sent an identification guide to the observer to help him confirm species identity, and we gave the Port Authority the telephone number for British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) so they could keep an eye on the whale. We had no more sightings of the whale reported to us that day (but later gathered it was seen by others at Greenwich Ferry terminal around 4.30 pm, whilst Liz Sandeman of Marine Connection heard of a sighting of two animals in the Estuary on the Wednesday).

Early on Friday, the whale was sighted well up the river Thames first at Greenwich (around 4.30 am) and then near Westminster (9.30 am) in Central London. It quickly attracted crowds of people including the media, and Sky News started televising it on a continuous basis. By this time, we were bombarded by the media with questions as



Photos: Zoological Society of London

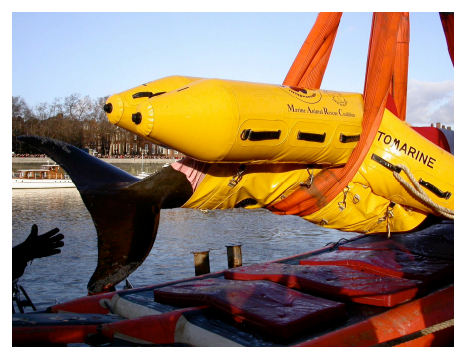


to its identity and what it was doing there. Our North-east England Regional Co-ordinator, Andy Tait, rushed into a TV store in Newcastle to watch it on Sky News, and confirmed that it was indeed a northern bottlenose whale! The next question to answer was what was it doing there. Either it was in ill health or it simply had become lost in the shallow reaches of the southernmost North Sea, given that its usual habitat are offshore canyons of more than one thousand metres depth such as found northwest of the Shetland Islands, west of the Outer Hebrides, or to the south in the Bay of Biscay. A report of another northern bottlenose whale from near Southend-On-Sea, Essex was conveyed to us, and together with two whales thought to be of this species seen from Aberdeen on Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> January, suggested that this Thames whale may have been part of a larger group. Speculating further,

the presence around this time of other squid feeding cetaceans (Risso's dolphin, striped dolphin and long-finned pilot whale – and more recently, sperm whale) in coastal waters of the North Sea indicated that maybe there were unusual quantities of squid temporarily in the region that may have encouraged the species to enter the North Sea.

Whatever the cause for its presence in Central London, the whale was unlikely to survive there for long in the shallows of the river, nor be readily able to find its way out of this narrow busy waterway, and so a rapid rescue was recommended, preferably to the nearest open water rather than returned to the southernmost North Sea. The whale in fact temporarily stranded a few times before the tide started to rise, allowing it at least to move eastwards a bit towards the end of the day. Nevertheless, it was still high up the Thames in the vicinity of Westminster Bridge.

By Saturday morning, news of the whale seemed to grip the nation and beyond, with TV, radio and newspapers reporting it from the United States and Canada to Australia and New Zealand. At lunchtime, the whale remained far upriver between Albert Bridge and Battersea Bridge. So early in the afternoon, BDMLR with help from Zoological Society of London (ZSL) vets, and others, successfully lifted the whale out of the river and onto a barge where it was transported back out to the Thames Estuary. However, sadly, around 7 pm that evening, the whale started convulsing and died. The results of a blood sample taken shortly after the whale was lifted onto the large barge showed that the whale was already suffering severe dehydration and kidney failure as





well as some mild muscle damage.

Over the coming days, a team of ZSL vets and scientists led by Dr. Paul Jepson conducted a post-mortem of the whale assisted by Professor Antonio Fernández and Dr. Manolo Arbelo (University of Las Palmas, Gran Canaria). The whale was an immature female of 5.85 metres length. Her stomach contained a number of squid beaks but she clearly had not fed for some time. The post-mortem examination showed no preliminary signs of acoustic trauma or gas emboli (which have been known to cause strandings of beaked whales in the past).

Our general conclusion is that it may have entered the North Sea with others, following squid, and then lost its way, ending up in the southernmost North Sea where it was unable to find its way back into the Atlantic and instead travelled west up the river Thames. The lack of squid (which are an important source of water) over a period of time may have contributed to the whale's dehydration, and its extended period in very shallow water probably was the cause of its relatively mild muscle damage.

To our knowledge, no other northern bottlenose whale has been recorded this far up the river Thames. However, there have been a number of other records from the Thames Estuary. These include: a female caught off the Essex coast on 23 Sept 1717; one of 6.4 m length captured in the Thames in 1783; one stranded in 1817 on the Essex coast; two males seen in 1891 off the Essex coast (one of these stranded at the end of July, and the other was caught on 3rd August; the latter measured 7.6 m). The stranding occurred in the Thames near Nore Lightship, and was eventually towed into Leigh-On-Sea, Essex. The latter was caught near Creeksmouth, Barking, Essex. More recently, on 9 Oct 1916, one (5.5 m length) stranded at Mucking, Essex. A London record (near Albert Dock, Woolwich Arsenal) from November 1899 reported in some of the national newspapers as the last report of northern bottlenose whale in the Thames, was actually a fin whale.

**Peter Evans**

## **Bottlenose dolphin trapped in Maryport Harbour rescued and set free**

In the previous edition of the SWF newssheet, we reported the frequent sightings of a single bottlenose dolphin seen between Maryport Harbour and Workington, Cumbria. The dolphin was first spotted in November, but went relatively unnoticed by the locals until about New Year when it took to following boats in and out of Maryport Harbour. With fine weather over the holiday period and after coverage in the local press and regional TV news, lots of people subsequently turned up to catch a glimpse of the Maryport visitor.

The dolphin, which was given the nickname "Marra", became so accustomed to swimming in the harbour that on the 5<sup>th</sup> January it entered the Maryport yacht marina (a tidal harbour with a lock gate) on high tide and the marina operators were unable to persuade it to leave when shutting the gates. Marra continued to be confined in the Maryport marina despite the efforts of numerous specialists and the local public to entice him out of there.

On Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> January, after increasing concerns over the wellbeing of the animal, there was a large-scale rescue attempt involving British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR), British Sub Aqua Club (BSAC), the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDACS) and other organisations including the local inshore lifeboat. Pingers and recordings of several different dolphin vocalizations were played underwater while boats attempted to coax the dolphin out of the marina, and a large net was hung over the exit ready to drop into the water to prevent the dolphin returning should he choose to follow one of the boats out of the marina. The dolphin, however, had other ideas and decided he was staying put.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> January, after a second rescue attempt, Marra was finally caught and taken out to sea. He was starting to show some signs of cuts and abrasions and the marina was beginning to freeze, so BDMLR joined forces with the coast guard and the police to capture and lift the dolphin out of the marina. Members of Silloth inshore RNLI reported that three other dolphins were seen just seven miles north of Maryport. We hope that these were part of Marra's own group and that he has now happily rejoined his family!

**Hanna Nuutilla**



Photo Mark Volders, (The Lake District Coast Aquarium)

## December-January highlights

### Scotland

Hours of patient watching finally paid off for Colin Bird on Christmas Day, when he sighted the large dorsal fin of a Risso's dolphin close inshore near Lybster Harbour. The animal headed out to sea and disappeared, but within the next half hour another two animals swam past. As if the Risso's weren't enough of a Christmas present, later on in the afternoon two common dolphins surfaced right in front of Colin, 400 yards offshore. During January, there have been plenty of sightings at Lybster of harbour porpoise, and two more of Risso's dolphins. A few sightings of bottlenose dolphins have been recorded in Cullen Bay, Moray Firth, and a few porpoise have been seen off Chanonry Point. Although there have been fewer reported sightings of dolphins in Aberdeenshire, they are still there, and large groups have been spotted off Torry Battery.

A pod of five killer whales was seen on 2<sup>nd</sup> December from a local ferry by the skipper, Ronnie Dyer. The whales were spotted one mile west of Point of Sleat, the southwestern tip of Isle of Skye just after midday. In addition, a large school of approximately 200 common dolphins was seen heading north off Portpatrick harbour, by the local RNLI boat, on 8<sup>th</sup> January.

Finally, a very unusual sighting of approximately six striped dolphins was reported from Montrose Bay on the 11<sup>th</sup> January. The dolphins headed north, passing a group of bottlenose dolphins on their way.

### England, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands

Harbour porpoises were reported from Tynemouth during December and January, and in a very unusual sighting, two killer whales were seen ten miles east of the River Tyne on the 26<sup>th</sup> December. Over on the west coast, in addition to the resident bottlenose dolphin in Maryport there have been a few sightings of harbour porpoises from Blackpool.

A group of eight Risso's dolphins was sighted off the Isle of Man on the 12<sup>th</sup> December. Jackie and Graham Hall saw the group passing Port St Mary early on in the morning. The news soon spread and the entire island was alerted to the sightings by a local radio station. Three Risso's dolphins were also seen later on the same day by Amanda Biggins, one km southwest of Poylvaaish Farm House. Four more Risso's were seen on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January from Port St Mary.

On the south coast of England, a single bottlenose dolphin has been visiting Portsmouth harbour since September and is still being seen regularly. Bottlenose dolphins have also been sighted in Weymouth, off Durlston and in St Ives Bay, and groups of between five and ten were seen several times in late December in Jersey.

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

## Regional Roundup December 2005 and January 2006

### Orkney Islands

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

Unfortunately the only records from this region for December and January have been of dead cetaceans. One minke whale was found entangled in creel ropes and freshly dead off Flotta, in Scapa Flow, on 11<sup>th</sup> December. The body of a Cuvier's beaked whale, not fresh, stranded on Sanday on 1<sup>st</sup> December. The skeleton is now in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. Finally a juvenile white-beaked dolphin stranded alive but then died, on the island of Westray on 3<sup>rd</sup> December.

### Northern Scotland: Moray Firth

#### From Howard Hartley Loates, regional coordinator, (Sutors of Cromarty to Kessock/Inverness)

I intend to start a local Sea Watch Group in Inverness. The purpose of the group would be to collect information, raise awareness of cetaceans, and to encourage people to share their interest in cetaceans. Inverness is close to a number of fantastic watching sites, it is easy to get to both the east and west coasts and see several species of whales and dolphins in addition to our resident Moray Firth bottlenose dolphins. I envisage group outings looking for cetaceans, and related indoor meetings. I hope to have an inaugural meeting in mid May with

Dr Peter Evans (Scientific Director) giving an introductory talk about Sea Watch and cetaceans. Anyone interested please contact me on 01463 221312 or email [howardloates@zetnet.co.uk](mailto:howardloates@zetnet.co.uk).

### **North East Scotland**

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

A slow start to the month was perhaps due to a combination of weather, short days and frantic Christmas shopping. Surprisingly, throughout the month, four species were recorded. Most of the sightings were of porpoise, but numbers were low. Towards the end of December, weather conditions were very calm and bright; good for spotting porpoise. The maximum count was three individuals seen off Lybster, Caithness on 17<sup>th</sup> and off StrathSteven, Sutherland on 31<sup>st</sup>.

Bottlenose dolphin sightings were few and far between. A single sighting of three was reported from Balintore, Ross-shire on the 11<sup>th</sup> December. For once, sightings of Risso's dolphin and common dolphin equalled the number of sightings for bottlenose dolphin. A single Risso's dolphin was seen twice off Lybster on Christmas day, and two common dolphins were also reported from the same survey.

The New Year started well with a single bottlenose dolphin and three porpoise reported off StrathSteven on the 1<sup>st</sup>. This was to be the only day in January that bottlenose dolphins were reported, but there were several sightings of porpoise. The maximum count was six porpoises off StrathSteven on 2<sup>nd</sup>. The highlight of the month was a single Risso's dolphin off Lybster on 14<sup>th</sup>. On a sadder note, a freshly dead white-beaked dolphin was washed ashore at Strathay Bay. A member of the public had cut the dead animal open, possibly to see what the dolphin had been feeding on.



Photo Colin Bird

### **Grampian**

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

Sightings in our area ranged from Fort George to Findochty, but I am sure there would have been more had more folk been able to brave the winter weather to watch. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> December, ten harbour porpoise were seen at Fort George. The following day, 20+ bottlenose dolphins were recorded heading west off Burghead and a similar number (18+) were seen at the same site on the 10<sup>th</sup>. A lone dolphin was spotted from the hostel at Findochty on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Four to five bottlenose were seen off Hopeman on the 14<sup>th</sup> and six or more were seen off Spey Bay on Christmas day. On the 27<sup>th</sup> we took the Gemini Explorer out to Sandend and back to Buckie - sadly no sightings but great "craic" with music and mince pies; later on, we all ended back at the hostel for a gig and the northern lights were dancing at 9.45 pm!

The first four days of the New Year were amazing, with bright sunshine, excellent for walking along the beach. Three walks along various parts of the coast, unfortunately, revealed no sightings. The first sighting of the year here was at Chanonry Point with two dolphins recorded. Over at Fort George, three harbour porpoise were encountered on the 7<sup>th</sup> with a further nine spotted on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> January saw three sightings of bottlenose dolphins, with two off Fort George, four off Macduff and at least six off Spey Bay. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, three dolphins were recorded off Fort George and 18-20 bottlenose were seen in Cullen Bay from the Gemini Explorer. It was great to encounter the animals again and at least eight seemed to be glued to the bow.

Together with the local Friends of the Moray Firth Dolphins (FMFD) group, we have been concerned about the building of a 500-berth marina at Whiteness nature reserve, Fort George. The issue received good coverage in the local press and was highlighted in the news and BBC programme "Landward".

Our monthly watch was a great turnout, with 25+ people there on the headland at Burghead. Sadly there was only a grey seal to report and a few long-tailed ducks, but it was so nice to see so many folk at the watch. Our next watch is at Findochty on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February. We will meet at Findochty Church at 2pm till 4pm with soup and rolls at the hostel later on. Till then, fine watching to you all.

### **South Grampian**

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

Bottlenose dolphins were recorded on only 13 occasions in December, and all sightings were from Aberdeen. This low activity was a reflection of lack of daylight, rougher seas, snow on five separate occasions, and the festive period, as most dedicated watching is limited to weekends with better weather. Group sizes were typically of 6-12 animals, but with a relatively high abundance of calves (a group of seven animals often had three calves), again suggesting the calmer waters of the harbour are used as a 'creche' Notably large groups were 50+ dispersed from

Aberdeen harbour to Balmedie on the 20<sup>th</sup> December. Harbour porpoises were the only other recorded species with two sightings both of single animals from the Aberdeen area.

January yielded 24 reported sightings, comprising bottlenose dolphins and harbour porpoise much as expected, but also a sighting of six striped dolphins in Montrose Bay on the 12<sup>th</sup> January, two northern bottlenose whales heading south past Girdleness on the 24<sup>th</sup>, five pilot whales off Gourdon on the same day, and two pilot whales off Lunan Bay on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Of the 22 'usual suspects', we had four reports of porpoise and 18 of bottlenose dolphins. Large groups of feeding bottlenose dolphins were seen on two occasions, with 18 at Aberdeen Harbour on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 15 off Aberdeen on the 15<sup>th</sup> January. A group of 50+ was reported from Montrose on the 12<sup>th</sup> possibly associated with striped dolphins, and four encounters occurred during a sea-based survey from Stonehaven on the 21<sup>st</sup> when groups of 14, 5, 3, 13 and 6 respectively were all encountered heading north during an hour or so, as the boat was returning south from Aberdeen. This trip had only moments earlier encountered a solitary individual and a pair of harbour porpoises also heading north past Findon.

### **North West Scotland**

#### **From Ian Birks, regional coordinator for North West Scotland**

December was another wet and windy month making sightings generally impossible. Three days before Christmas the wind died, the sun shone and we watched the sea in hope. Nothing! These conditions lasted into the first week of the New Year, but still, nothing. This time last year we were seeing lots of rafts of guillemots and razorbills indicating that there were fish stocks, and having harbour porpoise sightings too. On the down side a lot of guillemots were diseased and dying.

The middle of January became wet and windy, bringing sea watching to an end again, but by the 24<sup>th</sup> it was back to being calm and sunny. By the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>, we had seen two adult harbour porpoises in Strath Bay at Gairloch, right in front of my lounge windows, which was a joy to watch. Two were seen again in the Bay on the 26<sup>th</sup>, foraging around all morning in calm sunny conditions. The next sighting was again in Strath Bay on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> with three adults foraging in the Bay. For those wondering why Strath Bay gets such good results, two points: one, it is a good feeding ground closed to mobile fishing gear for a quarter century; two, my house is right on the shore and I am too old and idle to look for a better watch site! On the 31<sup>st</sup>, Ian French topped my sightings by watching four adult porpoises, again in Strath Bay, feeding very energetically. Ian hopes they stay around as he also operates the marine life cruises and runs the Gairloch Marine Life Centre. I had been giving a hand with odd jobs on his passenger boat the day before, only to be distracted by seals and sea eagles.

Bernard Cookson and his wife reported a large number of porpoises off Waternish Head on the Isle of Skye, seen from about 3.00 to 4.00 pm on 28<sup>th</sup> January. It was a very calm day, with good visibility and the sea state was calm to slight. The tide was flowing north and groups of porpoises were seen within a radius of about 1000 yards from the point, mostly to the west and north. They estimated between 30 and 40 groups of two to four porpoises, and were quite certain that they were not counting the same group twice because they were so well spread out. When they surfaced, they were travelling in various directions. A small number of them splashed the surface, giving the impression that they were diving, as opposed to the normal quiet rolling. There were three grey seals around as well, but they stayed close to the shore. Although the Cooksons are sailors and are well used to seeing porpoises, they have never before seen them in such numbers.

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

#### **From Laura Mandleberg (sightings officer), Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust.**

There were just three sightings during December, all of bottlenose dolphins. A local creel boat reported the first of these sightings. The fishermen described a group of around 20 individuals, with five playing around the front of the vessel. The rest of the group were foraging closer in to the coast. The remaining sightings of bottlenose dolphins for December were both reported on New Year's Eve. A group of 12 was seen mid-morning off the south coast of Mull and a few hours later another group was spotted approximately 25 miles further south off Port Askaig, Islay. Bottlenose dolphins may routinely swim at speeds of about three to seven miles per hour. However, some studies indicate maximum speeds of 18 to 22 miles per hour. It is possible therefore that these two sightings were of the same group, although they would have had to be travelling faster than average to make this distance.

Like December, there were three separate sightings of bottlenose dolphins in January. The first report came in on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January not far from where they were seen on New Year's Eve (South of Islay, off the Kintyre peninsula). Local residents spotted the dolphins (approx. 14) moving slowly down the coast, coming at times extremely close to the shore, in amongst the kelp! As for December, the other two sightings were reported within hours of each other on the same day (24<sup>th</sup> January) and both groups were seen in the Firth of Clyde. Common dolphins were apparently spotted from a ferry travelling between North Uist and South Harris. The dolphins were bow-riding the ferry, providing passengers and crew with a fairly unusual treat for this time of year. Finally, a large school of porpoises



was seen off Turnberry Point, Firth of Clyde. The observer also reported that he sees porpoises here in this spot all year round.

Although sightings have been few and far between in December and January, they are nevertheless extremely useful and provide much needed information on species distribution during the quiet winter months. Of particular interest are the reports of the bottlenose dolphins. There is still much we have to learn about the year-round distribution of the west coast population of bottlenose dolphins, and these valuable reports provide some insight into their winter movements and contribute towards the theory that the west coast of Scotland, like the Moray Firth, may support a year-round resident population of this species.

### **North East England: Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and Durham**

**From Andy Tait, regional coordinator for North East England**

The sightings for the northeast of England got off to a good start with three porpoise seen off Lizard Point, all foraging separately about 100m apart, the closest only being 50m from the shore on the 5<sup>th</sup> December. The next day, two porpoise were seen off Lizard Point travelling slowly south 150m offshore. A single porpoise was seen on the 7<sup>th</sup>, travelling southeast 200m offshore at Lizard Point. Maybe due to the heavy seas and high winds, there was a big gap in sightings until near the end of the month, when there was a unusual sighting of two orcas ten miles east of the River Tyne on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

The first sighting of 2006 was of two porpoises foraging off South Shields pier on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Unfortunately, the next sighting wasn't until the 30<sup>th</sup>, with a single sighting of a porpoise, apparently on a mission, swimming very fast south-east off Lizard Point. Tragically, the day before, a young female white beaked dolphin was found dead on Warkworth beach without any injuries apart from a head wound.

### **Eastern England: North Yorkshire, East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire**

**From Robin Petch and Kris Simpson, regional coordinators for east England**

December and January were quiet on the sightings front although we did receive a harbour porpoise sighting from a casual watcher near Spurn Head, as well as a couple of post cards reporting earlier sightings. Our increasing involvement with "The Deep" aquarium in Hull, however, continues to benefit Sea Watch. Dr David Gibson, director of animal husbandry, has asked me to help develop new information panels about the local North Sea and Humber Estuary environment, and this will include information about reporting cetacean sightings and some key species. Once their pantomime is over (don't ask!), we will begin preparing for further training and watches with their staff and for other joint events during the coming year.

### **Eastern England: East Anglia**

**From Mark Iley, Essex Wildlife Trust**

We have two records from this period, the first of a porpoise found dead at Osea Island, in the River Blackwater, Essex. An observer reported finding the body of a 5' - 6' long porpoise on the tide line at the eastern end of the Island on 15<sup>th</sup> January. The porpoise was described as "decomposing with fin missing and in a position where it may have floated off by today". The second sighting was of course the northern bottlenose whale in the River Thames, which was reported to me by Environment Agency staff

### **Eastern England: Thames Estuary**

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

During December, seven seal sightings were sent in, five of which were identified as grey seals. The seals were spotted around Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs, and one was from further upstream towards Barnes.

During January, we received five seal sightings, two of which were identified as grey seals. An unusual sighting of a harbour porpoise was also reported as far upstream as Kew Gardens on 17<sup>th</sup> January from a reliable source. However, the sighting of the month, for the Thames, was of course the northern bottlenose whale that was unfortunate enough to find its way into the estuary and travelled into the centre of London as far upstream as Battersea Bridge.

### **Southern England: Kent**

**From David Walker, Dungeness**

Our meagre offering of cetaceans for the last two months off Dungeness are: one harbour porpoise on 12<sup>th</sup> December, three on 13<sup>th</sup> December and two on 27<sup>th</sup> January. The decrease in sightings is probably genuine but sea conditions at this time of year do not help with observations.

**Southern England: Sussex****From Stephen Savage, regional coordinator for Sussex**

The last two months have been quiet along the Sussex coast, which is typical for this time of the year. We received only one anecdotal sighting of dolphins, probably bottlenose, in January, seen off the Brighton Marina. A large grey seal was observed swimming and diving close to shore at Hove on 20<sup>th</sup> December. A dead harbour porpoise washed ashore at Shoreham-by-Sea (West Sussex) on 27<sup>th</sup> January. It was a metre long with damage to its snout and tips of the fins.

The strandline exhibition mentioned in the last newsletter has been extended to 4<sup>th</sup> June, originally due to end 19<sup>th</sup> March. I had a major role in creating the exhibition at the Booth Museum for the River Ocean Foundation as part of a European funded project called Ocean 2. The exhibition is a mixture of biological fact relating to strandline objects, myths and folklore, history, marine litter, and sea mammal strandings. This latter section provides insight into UK cetaceans and the work of the Sea Watch Foundation as a background to the central theme of sea mammal strandings. It largely focused on reasons why marine mammals might strand and the things that scientists can learn by studying stranded animals both in terms of their natural history and conservation. I have had the opportunity to take some of my groups to the exhibition to teach (both children and adult groups) and there has been a great increase in the number of questions since the sad end to the bottlenose whale in the Thames recently. A follow-up information sheet provided for people visiting the exhibition includes a mention about the Sea Watch Foundation, and encourages them to visit the Sea Watch website

**South West England: Dorset & Hampshire****From Jo Wharam, Durlston Marine Project**

Only two sightings were reported during December, both of bottlenose dolphins. On the 7<sup>th</sup> December, three to five dolphins were seen off the Cuttings, Portland. On 29<sup>th</sup> December, one dolphin was seen following the car ferry from Portsmouth to the Isle of Wight. Four sightings of bottlenose dolphins were received in January. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, seven dolphins were spotted from a fishing boat off Durlston. One dolphin was seen hunting, 250 m offshore in Weymouth Bay on the 17<sup>th</sup>, and on the 19<sup>th</sup> two were seen in Poole Bay, approximately 500m off Hengistbury Head. Finally, seven dolphins were seen on the 21<sup>st</sup> January in Poole Bay, off Southbourn, Bournemouth, herding sprats in circles and feeding.

**South West England: Devon****From Gavin Black, Dolphin Protection Programme (DPP) Officer, Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT)**

Like the last period (October-November 2005), this has been a quiet time for cetaceans in Devon. No bottlenose dolphins have been spotted at all around the coasts in these months. However, it has not been uneventful.

Harbour porpoises are being recorded almost constantly from the entire length of the North Devon coast. From Foreland Point in Exmoor to Bude, David Jenkins has been getting regular sightings of groups of up to 20 porpoises. Even more encouragingly, for the first time in perhaps a long time, up to six porpoises have been recorded by Nigel Smallbones and other surveyors almost every day since the beginning of December, off Berry Head, near Brixham. This is the only location on the South Devon coast where we are getting regular sightings of them.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> December, four or five large dolphins were seen just off Dawlish Warren near the mouth of the Exe Estuary. They were identified as possible Risso's dolphins but this has yet to be confirmed. If this is correct these will be the first Risso's dolphins seen in these waters for a few years.

Unlike Cornwall, Devon has had only a few dead stranded cetaceans wash up in these months. Six common dolphins have been stranded, and with the exception of one, all washed up in and around Plymouth Sound. With only one period of strong south-westerlies to blow them onshore, this figure is likely to increase over the next couple of months.

**From Douglas Herdson, National Marine Aquarium, Plymouth**

The only news we have at the moment apart from dolphin casualties on the beaches and in the dockyard, is a report of three large whales (presumably fin) from Interfish, our local fishing company. The whales were sighted on 17<sup>th</sup> January approximately 10 miles SW of Eddystone Light House (Plymouth, 50°04'N, 4°36'W). The boat's skipper said that "the whales appeared to be feeding; we sighted them blowing and appearing to release air while submerged, possible herding food. This is the first time I've seen anything like this in 30 years at sea!"



**South West England: Cornwall****From David Ball, Silver Dolphin Centre, Porthleven**

In December, two large pods of common dolphins (of approximately 150 and 1200 individuals) were reported by Orca Seafaris, who operate out of Falmouth. Only two bottlenose dolphin sightings were recorded, but we received seven sightings of harbour porpoise, and there was also one report of a Risso's dolphin in Mounts Bay.

In the New Year, we are planning more boat trips and sightings training courses. We also plan to display more information about the sightings around the Cornish coast at the visitor centre. We are looking for volunteers who may be interested in taking part in coastal sightings. The National Coast Watch has been very helpful over the past year and now with the information we have, we want to carry out more observations at local hotspots. We also have local boat owners that would welcome observers on their trips so if you are interested, please contact the centre. I would also like to thank all at Orca Seafaris of Falmouth and Mermaid Cruises of Penzance for running trips for us and who regularly report sightings to us.

For more information please contact: The Silver Dolphin Centre, Trinity House, Wharf Road, Penzance, Cornwall, TR18 4BN, telephone 01736 364860 or 07881 688 234, e mail [conservation@silverdolphin.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:conservation@silverdolphin.freeserve.co.uk) or see our website at [www.silverdolphinmarineconservationanddiving.co.uk](http://www.silverdolphinmarineconservationanddiving.co.uk)

**From Dan Jarvis, Cornwall Wildlife Trust**

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There have been few sightings in December and January down here in Cornwall, probably due to the rough seas making observations difficult, but there have still been some excellent reports come in to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust sightings scheme.

There have been fewer reports of bottlenose dolphins compared to previous periods. A pod of five was seen at Sennen in early December, while slightly larger pods were seen around St Ives in mid January. These sightings continued for the rest of the month and it has been reported that the St Ives Bay pod now contains a very small calf. Possibly the same pod has also been sighted at St Agnes, Perranporth and Treyarnon further to the east.

There was a single sighting of Risso's dolphins in Mount's Bay on December 17<sup>th</sup>. The pod of three was spotted not far from a couple of harbour porpoises, and indeed all December sightings came from this location. Harbour porpoise sightings were always of small groups, ranging from two to six individuals. A pod of four was seen off Pentire, Newquay, in January; another four at The Moulds on the 18<sup>th</sup>; and a lone porpoise off St Ives nearer the end of the month.

Common dolphins have been abundant throughout December, with a pod of 150 off the Helford River in early December, and an incredible sighting of a 'superpod' with an estimated 1200 animals on December 19<sup>th</sup> – a fantastic Christmas present for those who saw them. Large pods of around 500 have continued to be seen during January in the same locality, and it is most likely this species that has also been seen frequently by fishermen around Wolf Rock in large numbers for at least a couple of weeks at the beginning of 2006.

A report came in from a fishing boat that three very large whales (estimated at 60-70ft in length) were sighted in the English Channel 10 miles SW of the Eddystone Lighthouse, south of Plymouth, on 17<sup>th</sup> January. It is most likely that these were the same fin whales mentioned by Douglas Herdson (see above). Fin whales annually visit the south west of the U.K. in winter, although they are normally seen around the Land's End – Lizard Peninsulas. At least one confirmed fin whale sighting was made at the beginning of February, and was featured, with video footage, on local news. The single animal was accompanied by large numbers of common dolphins off Falmouth.

The other sightings of note were a common seal at Sennen, seen on 20<sup>th</sup> December hauled out on the Cowloe reef, and another – possibly the same animal, at Porth Loo beach on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, on 26<sup>th</sup> January. There have also been three very early basking shark sightings, two near the Lizard on 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> January and, around the same date, another was seen off the North Cornwall coast – are we going to have a bumper year for this species?

In the previous issue of the SWF new sheet (November 2005) I noted that lone common seals had been observed at Godrevy and St Ives in mid - late 2005. Further investigation by the Cornwall Seal Group ([www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk](http://www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk)) has revealed that these two animals are in fact the same individual through comparison of pelage markings on photographs that were taken. It appears that this individual may have taken up residence somewhere along the North Cornwall coast, as it has been here since at least the beginning of July, and the latest sightings above may well be of the same seal. The CSG has also had an exciting winter, with a total of 16 grey seal pups being born in the main study area. The latest pup was spotted near Portreath in the first few days of February, and is the only pup to be recorded by the Group in that month since observations began in 2000. The only months where no whitecoat pups have been recorded are March and April. Photo-ID work has continued to turn up excellent results with seals from the main study area having now been positively identified at seven other locations: Nanjizal, Pendeen, Treen, the Carracks, St Ives, Portreath and Newquay.

Further injured and ill grey seal pups have continued to appear on Cornish beaches, and have been rescued and taken to the National Seal Sanctuary ([www.sealsanctuary.co.uk/corn.html](http://www.sealsanctuary.co.uk/corn.html)) for rehabilitation. There are now 46

pups under their care, but the normal rescue season ends around February, so the number is not expected to increase much more. One rescue worthy of note was that of an abandoned white coated grey seal pup from Porthtowan on 14<sup>th</sup> January, estimated at two days old when it was brought in by RSPCA Officer Felicity Cross – a late addition to the 05/06 breeding season. ‘Ginger’, as she has been named, is currently doing well and being weaned on to fish. Meanwhile, the first releases of the ‘05/06 rescue season have now taken place, and more are likely to follow shortly.

After a surprisingly quiet winter for by-caught cetacean carcasses becoming stranded, a few days in mid January suddenly changed all this when more than 20 carcasses, mostly common dolphins, began coming ashore all over the south coast of the county. Some were taken for post mortem examination, but the signs of net entanglement were evident on many of the freshly dead bodies. Volunteers from the Cornwall Wildlife Trust Strandings Network (which has recently launched its website at [www.cwtstrandings.org](http://www.cwtstrandings.org)) did a great job of going out to record the details of the strandings, and also managed to get some carcasses off the beaches for further examination. There have now been over 40 dead cetaceans stranding in January alone.

Medics from British Divers Marine Life Rescue ([www.bdmlr.org](http://www.bdmlr.org)) were called out on December 12<sup>th</sup> to a common dolphin that appeared to be trapped in Porthleven Harbour. On arrival, it was discovered that the poor animal was badly entangled in monofilament net, which had cut into its head, flippers and tail. The animal was coaxed into shallow water near the harbour wall where medics were able to support it and keep it as calm as possible until it was euthanised by a consultant marine mammal veterinarian, due to the severity of the injuries and very poor nutritional condition. South West Medics (including myself) were also called upon for their expertise, in the Cumbria bottlenose dolphin rescue, which took place on January 29<sup>th</sup>.

There have been few events over the winter period, but, in January, the BDMLR group in Cornwall was visited by Head Office members Alan Knight (Chairman), Trevor Weeks (National Coordinator) and Sue White (‘Oracle’). The purpose of the visit was to deliver a Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB) to the team, the first and only one in the Southwest to be used specifically for the rescue of marine animals. The boat is named ‘Josh’ after the son of Jim and June Hayes (long-time BDMLR supporters) who sadly died after a long illness. The official launch of the boat was on January 14<sup>th</sup>, and the following day, medics took part in a new course that has been developed on how to rescue and treat oiled birds. In a strange moment of coincidence, just hours after the course ended, the medics attended a seal in St Ives that was found to have 50% oil coverage on its head and back! The new techniques learned earlier in the day were put into action and the animal, also named ‘Josh’ in tribute as above, is now progressing well at the National Seal Sanctuary.



Photo Karl Wheston

### **Emergency numbers:**

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

People are warned to not approach or handle any pups that they may find on the beach, as this can cause the mother to reject it, as well as the danger of being bitten and 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.**

In Wales, there has been an almost total lack of dolphins in New Quay, although they have been seen both north and south of the Cardigan Bay. Nia Jones, from Marine Awareness North Wales, reported a sighting by Dave Powell of approximately 70 bottlenose dolphins on the 20<sup>th</sup> December and of 50 on the 21<sup>st</sup> off Point Lynas, Anglesey. The only sightings of dolphins in New Quay in the last two months was a sighting of ten animals seen off Fish Factory on 3<sup>rd</sup> and another five seen in New Quay Bay on 21<sup>st</sup> January. A single dolphin was seen off Mwnt in middle of February. Harbour porpoise on the other hand have been fairly regularly both from land and from sea, by our survey boat, Dunbar Castle 2 and by local New Quay fishermen, off New Quay head, Ynys Lochlyn and Mwnt.

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

Although the weather was generally mild in December and January, the constant northerly winds made viewing conditions difficult, particularly here on the west coast. Others were more lucky, and the 12<sup>th</sup> of December provided good sightings of Risso's dolphins at the southern end of Mann. From 10:40 am until after well after midday, up to twelve Risso's dolphins were watched by Graham and Jackie Hall from their elevated position high above Port St. Mary. At the same time, Amanda Biggins was seeing some of the same group as she undertook her chough research at Poyllvaish. The Risso's were seen in small groups of two to six, but the maximum number seen at one time was estimated to be about 12 individuals, some possibly juveniles. Not far from the Risso's, a pair of harbour porpoises was seen, although they did not remain visible for long. The New Year saw the return of a group of four Risso's dolphins on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Graham and Jackie Hall were able to watch them for over two hours from their balcony. The Risso's were sighted in the same area as those of the previous month, and were seen to move slowly close to Poyllvaish and around Scarlett Point. The following day, a group of six bottlenose dolphins was seen by Rob Cregeen as they moved from Derbyhaven to The Skerranes off the SW of Langness Point. They were first seen around midday against a calm sea.

The last recorded sighting for January provides an interesting mystery. Peter Canipa has seen and reported many cetaceans from around the east coast, in particular close to Douglas Head where the cliffs fall precipitously into the sea, providing deep water close to the rock face. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, he spotted a bottlenose dolphin which sported two readily identifiable markings. The dolphin was around 8 ft/2.5m long and carried a black mark on its side. A white object, some 3 inches long appeared to be attached to the rear of its dorsal fin and was possibly a tag of some sort. The dolphin was last seen swimming south.

Three dead harbour porpoises were found stranded in December, two in the south of Mann on Castletown beach, and one on the western shore at Glen Mooar. A fourth dead porpoise was discovered on the beach at Derbyhaven at the end of January. This last corpse was in good physical condition and has been frozen. It was recovered by Dr Fiona Gell, the IoM Government's Marine Conservation Officer, and is awaiting post-mortem analysis.

My own few watches have produced no sightings, but I content myself with seeing the hen harriers hunt over the farm. For those interested in my roosting choughs, they took an early Christmas break for nearly a week, but returned and continue to spend their nights in my tractor shed. They have yet to start nest building and I remain hopeful they will choose one of the fine nesting platforms we have installed up in the roof. We still have daily flocks of up to 21 choughs feeding along our cliffs and fields.

**Republic of Ireland****From Pádraig Whooley, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group sightings coordinator**

Fin whales were surprisingly the second most frequently reported species during this period in Irish waters, and were encountered on 34 occasions, an increase of almost 100% on the previous two months. All sightings were from the Irish south coast, of which 25 encounters were from Co. Cork's hotspots, eight were from Co. Waterford in the Ardmore to Mine Head area, and one from Co. Wexford. Group sizes ranged from one to five. There were an additional five sightings of large baleen whale species, most of which were reported as fin whales, but were subsequently downgraded on validation. All of these came from either Counties Waterford or Wexford. A quick plot of these sightings on the mapping facility on [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie) shows clearly that the distribution of sighting reflects observer effort. Just four encounters of minke whales were recorded. All sightings, bar one, were of single individuals and from those sites where watch effort was maintained, namely Sleah Head, Co. Kerry and West Cork. The most unusual sighting was of a single animal in Greystones, Co. Wicklow on 13<sup>th</sup> Dec. We note with interest that no sightings of humpback whales were reported during this period.

We received 26 sightings of common dolphins in groups ranging from four to 100 animals, and all bar one sighting came from Counties Cork, Waterford or Wexford. Bottlenose dolphins were encountered on eleven occasions either as single individuals or in pods of up to 30 animals. They were the most widely distributed dolphin species, with sightings reported from seven counties and in all provinces. There was just a single sighting of five Risso's dolphins from Wicklow Head, Irish Sea on 27<sup>th</sup> January. This species is rarely reported in Irish waters during winter months. There was a single sighting of Atlantic white-sided dolphins on 1<sup>st</sup> December when a group of four was observed in north-west offshore waters off Co. Mayo. Finally 45 sightings of harbour porpoise were recorded, either as single individuals or in groups of up to 15, as seen on 13<sup>th</sup> December off Sleah Head, Co. Kerry.

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 8,000 validated sightings

**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.**