

sea watch FOUNDATION



Beluga, C. Swann

Editorial

Welcome to the first edition of the Sea Watch Foundation news sheet for 2007, and a very happy new year to all! In this issue we'll be covering sightings for December 2006 - January 2007. There were wonderful rare sightings despite the dark and dismal winter months, including a beluga off Caithness on 31st January (he obviously wanted to make sure he would make the January edition), and killer whales off the Forth Bridge! Its as if we needed a reminder that there is still a lot to be seen at this time of year. So, please keep those sightings coming in, and as always, your contributions to the news sheet are very welcome, so please send them (and photos!) to me at lawsonhandley@mac.com.

Happy seawatching

Lori



Don't forget

NATIONAL WHALE AND DOLPHIN WATCH

23 June to 1 July 2007

please contact Hanna (info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk) for more information.

Cetacean Survey Training Courses for 2007

We are pleased to announce the next two-day training course, which will be held in New Quay, West Wales, on June 9th and 10th 2007.

The course will include lectures and videos on conservation issues facing UK cetaceans, species identification, and recommended survey methods for monitoring cetaceans. It will combine both land and boat-based watches allowing participants to directly learn how to conduct systematic watches and fill in standard recording forms. Boat-based work will also teach participants the skills needed for: estimating group size and distinguishing calves, juveniles and adults, assessing sea state and other key environmental details photographic techniques. There will also be the chance to practice species field identification and the recording of different behaviours. All participants will receive a detailed manual on how to record and monitor cetaceans and a certificate for completing the course.

For more information, please visit our website at: <http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk/education.php?uid=39> or contact Hanna Nuuttila on 01545 561227 or info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk

SIGHTINGS HIGHLIGHTS

December 2006 - January 2007

By Hanna Nuuttila

- A solitary sperm whale was spotted in Broadford Bay, Isle of Skye, in the early afternoon of Christmas Eve.
- A large group of bottlenose dolphins was spotted from the Isle of Man on 24th January just a few yards off Peel on the west coast.
- A Sowerby's beaked whale stranded in Loch Ewe on 26th January. The female whale was found to be pregnant but in good health and the cause of the stranding remains unclear.
- Killer whales were sighted in South East Scotland during January and February. The whales were seen just under the Forth rail bridge and were visited by hundreds of people.
- A rare beluga whale was sighted off Caithness on the 31st January.
- A Cuvier's beaked whale was found stranded in Stennigor Warbeth, Orkney on the 31st January.

As always, please send your sightings to Hanna Nuuttila, Sea Watch Foundation Sightings Officer, at: sightings@seawatchfoundation.org.uk (Please note the changed email address!!)

REGIONAL ROUNDUP

Orkney

From Chris Booth

In December, harbour porpoise were sighted a few times in Scapa Flow and off South Walls in Hoy. The only reported sighting in January was of three harbour porpoise in Scapa Flow on the 10th. There were also three strandings in January, all during the final few days of the month. The first was a white-sided dolphin, which was found freshly dead at Birsay on the 28th January. A dead Cuvier's beaked whale was found stranded on 31st January at Stennigor Warbeth (see photo from Ross Flett), and the same day a fin whale was found at Brims, Hoy.



Cuvier's beaked whale stranded on Orkney, R. Flett

North East Scotland: Caithness

Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila

This area was fairly quiet during December and January, although a single white-beaked dolphin was spotted in Thurso Bay on 27th December and groups of up to five harbour porpoise were sighted from Lybster Cliffs during December and January.

Moray Firth and North Grampian

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

As expected during December and January, sightings have been rather few and far between. Occasional sightings of harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin have been noted in the Inner Moray Firth but nothing of special interest has been brought to my attention.

South Grampian

From Kevin Hepworth, regional coordinator for South Grampian

During December the usual groups of bottlenose dolphins were present in Aberdeen Harbour, which meant a welcome reprieve from the hustle and bustle of Union Street. Despite the short days we ran two vessel-based surveys in fairly calm seas. We experienced fantastic weather from the 20th of the month through to New Year's Eve when we experienced clear blue skies whilst the south lay under a well reported blanket of fog (funny that when Aberdeen is basking beneath the haar and the rest of the country bakes it goes unreported!). With temperatures down to -7°C

overnight and barely above freezing during daylight hours it meant we had crystal clear visibility with flat seas, allowing superb conditions for land based watches.

We received a total of seventeen reports including a special encounter with a juvenile minke whale during a boat survey on the 17th, one harbour porpoise sighting, and fifteen sightings of bottlenose dolphins. The minke was seen lunge feeding approximately one mile off Cove. It then surfaced three times alongside the boat before vanishing. The same trip encountered the usual group of ten bottlenose dolphins just moments later, before a brief view of a harbour porpoise on the return leg to Stonehaven. All but three of the bottlenose dolphin reports came from Aberdeen, which is quite typical at this time of year. Group sizes were 4-10 animals, although the usual group of ten (comprising four juveniles including the skeletally deformed juvenile) was seen on ten occasions.

January was another mild, windy and stormy month. The fine days that we did get enabled good views of generally small numbers of bottlenose dolphin and harbour porpoise. We had a total of twenty sightings, three of which were of harbour porpoise and the rest of bottlenose dolphins. The bottlenose dolphins were present in Aberdeen Harbour on twelve occasions. Other reports were from Stonehaven (four reports) and there was one report of ten animals north of Montrose on the 28th January. Group size around Aberdeen was generally small and predominantly the same individuals with three to twelve animals present. The smaller groups tended to be the now infamous juvenile with skeletal deformity which seemed to be struggling in the swell at times and was often left at the harbour with its mother (and occasionally a second adult was present) whilst the 'bulk' of the group left for other areas. Notable groups were of the full contingent of twelve animals on the 13th and 26th of the month. The three harbour porpoise reports were all from Stonehaven with two on the 3rd and then 6th and three on the 29th January.

In additional news, we submitted a funding application to BP and supplied a species ID and description board to Port Erroll Harbour Authority for Notice Boards at Cruden Bay. At the end of January we ran an EGCP watch run at Torry Battery with five bottlenose dolphins observed.

South East Scotland

Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila

The big news for the South East Scotland was the killer whale or whales sighted in the Inner Forth Area during February. The first sighting of two killer whales was reported already in December from between Isle of May and Fife, so they might have been in the area for some time before venturing into the Forth.



Killer whales in the Firth of Forth, R. Harrower

West Sutherland

From Andy Summers, Sutherland Highland Ranger

No sightings were reported during December and January but a dead Atlantic white-sided dolphin was washed up at Balchladich beach near Stoer Lighthouse on the 31st January. There were no obvious signs of death by collision or being caught in a net or rope. It had fairly recently died and details were forwarded to the Strandings Officer.

North West Scotland

Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila

A lone pilot whale was sighted near Glenshiel by Kyle of Lochalsh on 19th January. It appeared to be feeding at the head of Loch Duich, Wester Ross and was seen over the next few days in various locations, swimming at a leisurely pace. On 4th of February the animal was stranded in shallow water and died shortly afterwards. In addition, a beaked whale stranded on the shores of Loch Ewe on 26th January. Marine Biologist and marine mammal medic Ian French from Gairloch Marine Life Centre and Cruises was called out to the stranding. Unfortunately the whale turned out to be dead, probably having died within the previous 48 hours, and reported back to Sea Watch. Initially the animal was thought to be a young northern bottlenose whale, however this was later formally identified as a Sowerby's beaked whale.

The Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) at Inverness were contacted and an autopsy was carried out early on the 27th. This revealed the female was heavily pregnant with a well developed foetus. The foetus showed a pronounced melon and has cast even more doubt as to the cetacean's identity, suggesting it may in fact be a True's beaked whale.

Samples were taken of all the major organs, none of which gave any clues to cause of death. In fact all signs indicate a very healthy whale. The rostrum and jaw bones were heavily smashed and shattered, however it is unclear whether the whale was hit by something or whether this was caused as it was washed ashore.



Sowerby's beaked whale stranded in Loch Ewe, I. French

West and South West Scotland (Hebrides)

From Laura Mandleberg, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust Sightings Officer

Stormy weather in the Hebrides has meant cetacean sightings have been few and far between for most of the winter. However, despite the persistent bad weather, bottlenose dolphin sightings have continued to prevail. There were a total of five sightings in December, spread out over a substantial part of the Hebrides from the Kintyre peninsula in south to the Skye coast in the north. A highlight was a visit by about 20 dolphins to Iona on Christmas day. The dolphins spent the day playing around the moorings in the Sound of Iona, treating the locals to a grand festive spectacle.

Sightings of bottlenose dolphins continued into January with a pair spotted off the Mull ferry and a much larger group seen in the Kilbrannan Sound from land a couple of days later. This is the same area where a large group of dolphins were photographed last summer, then later identified as the same group seen off the Mull coast the previous month. So, although we still have much to learn about the bottlenose dolphins in the Hebrides, it is looking more and more likely that the dolphins seen in this area belong to a small but wide-ranging population.

North East England

From Andy Tait, regional coordinator for North East England (Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and Durham)

On 12th December two possible orcas were sighted by Chris Bielby about 4-5 km east of Hartlepool. He saw two large erect (slightly falcate) dorsal fins heading south. The animals rose twice then turned to bear north-west. There were no sightings reported in January.

Eastern England: Tees Mouth to River Nene Mouth

From Robin Petch and Kris Simpson, regional coordinators for North Yorkshire, East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire

In December just one porpoise was sighted in middle of the Wash, Lincolnshire on the 23rd. The highlight of the month was a sighting of 15-20 dolphins, believed to be white-beaked, in Filey Bay on December 2nd. Mr and Mrs Beecham thought at first they were porpoise until they began jumping and showing their tails. January was a quiet month, with no sightings received from casual watchers or any of our known observers. Unfortunately due to family illness, Kris and I were unable to undertake watches but did have a brief walk along the Humber near the Humber Bridge one day. We hope as spring approaches we will begin to receive more sightings, hopefully without a repeat of last year's strandings!

Eastern England: Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk

Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila

Harbour porpoise were reported in Suffolk from Dunwich Heath on 8th, 19th and 23rd of December and 13th of January. Porpoise were also reported off Minsmere in December and from Orford Ness on the 9th December and 13th of January.

Eastern England: Thames Estuary

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

One seal and one harbour porpoise sighting were sent in for December. The porpoise was spotted near Canvey Island in the estuary and the seal near Blackwall. During January we received eight seal sightings, one of which was identified as a grey seal. They were observed between the docklands area of central London and Gallions Reach.

Southern England: Kent-Sussex

No sightings have been received for this area. Please contact us if you have any details.

Southern England: Dorset

Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila

On the 17th December two bottlenose dolphins joined in the Weymouth Yacht Club race in Weymouth Bay! There were also two sightings of bottlenose dolphins on the 29th of January, when two animals were seen passing Portland Bill from Durlston Country Park.

South West England: Devon

Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila

In North Devon the harbour porpoise made regular appearances throughout December in Baggy Point and Capstone Point, Ilfracombe. There was also an unconfirmed report of dolphins seen between Lundy Island and Ilfracombe on 21st December and a pair of bottlenose dolphins was sighted in Clovelly Harbour in early January.

In South Devon the harbour porpoise were regularly sighted from Berry Head over the autumn and winter months. A lone bottlenose dolphin was sighted at Broadsands, Torbay in late January.

South West England: Cornwall

From Dan Jarvis, Cornwall Wildlife Trust (sightings information reproduced with permission of Cornwall Wildlife Trust www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/).

December and January were pretty quiet for sightings compared to previous months, but a decent scattering of them has still been reported to the Seaquest Southwest sightings recording scheme. Four species of cetacean have been reported and conspicuously absent is the common dolphin, which at this time in previous years has been known to be present in large numbers... Where have they gone this year I wonder?

Harbour porpoises continued to be seen regularly along the North coast. Pods were observed at Boscastle, the Rumps, Porthcothan, Carn Gloom and Sennen, while one further sighting was made on the South coast at Charlestown, near St Austell. Bottlenose dolphins were seen at their favourite places as usual – St Ives, Hayle, Perranporth and Mount's Bay, while other observations of them were made at St Agnes, Chapel Porth, Cape Cornwall and Greeb. They appear to have been less active at the surface with the rougher winter weather, which may account for the drop in sightings recently. A lone Risso's dolphin casually swam past a boat a couple of miles off Towan Head, Newquay on the 19th December, giving those on board a special treat before it quickly disappeared without interacting with the vessel. Minke whales have also been spotted, with one seen off Polzeath on 19th December and another sighting (possibly the same one?) two days later on the 21st further up the coast some way offshore at Tintagel. In addition we have also received information that three fin whales were sighted on January 20th off Porthgwarra, and were also seen in the same area the following day.

Unidentified groups of dolphins were reported from St Ives, Kelsey Head, Rame Head and Mount's Bay. The latter of these sightings is thought to be of bottlenose dolphins, but could not be confirmed. It is possible that the elusive common dolphins may have been the involved in one or more of these observations, but again, confirmation of this is not possible.

Unusually, an ocean sunfish was spotted early on in December. This species is a well-known summer visitor, but it is extremely rare that they are seen so late in the year. Perhaps the warmer than normal sea temperatures have encouraged them to hang around longer? (Note that also in December, Steve Lewis of Pembrokeshire Dive Charters reported seeing a basking shark as he was nearing Plymouth during a boat trip from Wales. This is another rather unusual report for this time of year - Lori). By-the-wind-sailors kept on washing up further east in Cornwall and up into Devon and beyond during December, with related findings of violet sea snails, exotic seeds and columbus crabs, but reports have tailed off in January, so it would appear this patch of flotsam and jetsam from somewhere much warmer has now passed.

Other News.

A steady flow of dead seals and cetaceans were washed up on Cornish beaches throughout December and January and recorded by Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network (www.cwtstrandings.org) volunteers. Included in this was a bottlenose dolphin at Porthtowan just before Christmas, plus three leatherback turtles at Bude, Looe and the Isles of Scilly respectively during December. Maybe the presence of the turtles is related to the by-the-wind-sailors that have been swept by the ocean currents through the area recently?

Seal rescues have been continuing, with yet more taken for rehabilitation at RSPCA Hospital West Hatch in Somerset (www.rspca-westhatch.co.uk) and the National Seal Sanctuary (www.sealsanctuary.co.uk/corn1.html) by British Divers Marine Life Rescue (www.bdmlr.org). Medics have also been busy assisting with the oil spill from wrecked cargo ship MSC Napoli that got into difficulties off Lizard Point during mid-January. The ship had to be beached by HM Coastguard at Branscombe in Devon to prevent it from breaking up and causing a much larger environmental disaster. West Hatch RSPCA hospital was inundated with oiled birds from the area, taking in their 1000th bird about two weeks later. Some of these birds have now been nursed back to health and released. West Hatch staff also requested help from BDMLR to release a seal pup that had undergone rehabilitation, but could not be taken to a suitable location by staff, as they were busy dealing with the deluge of oiled birds. "Bauble" was released at Gwithian, near Hayle, towards the end of January and was quick to head out into the surf and disappear from view.

In the 2006/7 grey seal breeding season, Cornwall Seal Group (www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk) members recorded their first two cases of net-entangled adult females becoming pregnant. First identified on 4th May 2002 with a tight ring of monofilament embedded in her neck blubber, S46, a young female seal, is having her first pup. Sadly the ligature around her neck appears to be making her eyes bulge. A second net-entangled seal, S104, first seen on the 18th October 2003, has also fallen pregnant for the first time, although she looks less affected by her entanglement.

Events.

As with last time, few events have been held in the area during this period. The local BDMLR Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators held a meeting in early December to follow up and discuss the points raised at the National Coordinators meeting back in November, from which several action points are now being carried out. A Marine Mammal Medic training course has also been requested by Falmouth Marine School, which is now being prepared for February.

The CWT Marine Strandings Network has now developed a new recording technique in conjunction with the Institute of Zoology called the 'Bycatch Evidence Evaluation Project' (BEEP). This project has had to be created due to the cut in funding for post mortem examinations of cetaceans. Several experienced volunteers in Devon and Cornwall have now been trained on how to use the detailed recording forms to collate more extensive data from dead cetaceans, from which statistical analysis can be conducted and used to accurately ascertain whether the animal in question died by bycatch or from another cause. This will in turn allow pressure to be kept on the Government to act on the bycatch situation in the South West.

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. CWT is the official recorder of dead marine wildlife in Cornwall.

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

People are advised not to immediately return stranded cetaceans to the water, but to keep the animal upright and wet, avoiding getting water in the blowhole, until trained Medics and veterinarians can make thorough health checks.

Wales

From Hanna Nuuttila, Sea Watch Foundation Sightings Officer

Cetacean sightings have been quite sparse in December and January. Harbour porpoise were reported from Carmarthen Bay in mid December and were seen off Little Haven, Strumble Head, Aberporth and New Quay Bay. Bottlenose dolphins were seen off Mwnt, in New Quay Bay, off Aberystwyth, and Aberdovey. Last but not least a Risso's dolphin was spotted off Strumble Head in late December.

North West England

From Dave McGrath, Sustainability Education Officer at Solaris Centre, Blackpool

Generally the Fylde coast's weather was not good for watching for cetaceans during December and January, with strong winds and rough seas being the norm. However, calm seas did produce a few sightings of our resident(?) porpoises. Single harbour porpoises were off South Shore, Blackpool on 18th and 20th December. I saw two together close in shore after the hurricane force winds had died down on 22nd January. Unfortunately, I later learned of a dead porpoise that was found washed up on the beach at North Shore, Blackpool on 24th.

Isle of Man**From John Galpin, regional coordinator for the Isle of Man, and Manx Whale & Dolphin Watch**

The high winds of December made for particularly poor cetacean spotting. Christmas Day was the slight exception with Steve Black spotting a pair of harbour porpoises near Peel Castle around lunch-time (now that shows commitment!).

2007 started with strong winds, but on the 4th January, John Tinsley encountered a pod of 12 bottlenose dolphins while aboard his boat in Douglas Bay. The dolphins were heading south, travelling from Onchan Head towards the deeper water of Douglas Head. That same day, a pair of harbour porpoise was seen by John Cowin in a bay just north of Laxey.

A single minke whale was reported by two independent observers on the 6th January. The whale was seen between Onchan Head and Port Groudle by both John Tinsley from his boat and Steven Clennel from the shore. Minkes were seen along the same shore throughout the latter months of 2006, indicating a continuing presence of available food, possibly the last of the herring or the mackerel that have remained here in recent winters.

On the 23rd January, Christine Pickering took some visitors to Peel and while searching for seals, were delighted and surprised by a very large pod of bottlenose dolphins, foraging, leaping and breaching the seaward side of Peel's outer breakwater. The pod stretched across the sea, out to about 150 metres and the length of the breakwater and more, a distance of around 200 metres. With so much aerial activity and frenzied behaviour numbers were difficult to determine but a conservative estimate is given as 50+. They watched for about 15 minutes before the dolphins headed south around Peel Hill and Thistle Head. Despite driving to the next headland at Niarbyl, the dolphins were not seen again that afternoon.

Large numbers of bottlenose dolphins have been a regular occurrence during winter months over recent years, in contrast to the relatively fewer sightings in the summer. This might suggest that the dolphins visiting the Isle of Man in the winter belong to a group resident elsewhere in the summer – maybe those in Cardigan Bay, highlighting the need for good ID photos of our visitors, a task we have yet to achieve.

Channel Islands**Compiled by Hanna Nuuttila**

A single bottlenose dolphin was spotted off the east coast of Jersey on the 14th December. A group of 12 bottlenose dolphins were sighted off La Coupe on Christmas Day and another two dolphins were seen at Grosnez on the second of January.

Northern Ireland & Republic of Ireland**Compiled by Lori Handley** (All records are validated and available on www.iwdg.ie)

Sightings highlights for December in Ireland include a pod of 100 common dolphins seen off Capel Island, Cork on the 19th, and a pod of 50 off Ardmore Head, Waterford on the 2nd. Harbour porpoise were seen regularly throughout the month from several localities, with most notable reports of 35 individuals off Island Mageew, Antrim on 23rd December. Slightly smaller groups of twenty and fifteen were seen from the same place during the previous week (on the 17th and 19th respectively). Bottlenose dolphins were seen on three occasions from Galway, Cork and Dublin. Lone fin and minke whales were seen respectively from Ardmore Head, Waterford on the 9th and Loop Head, Clare on 27th.

Probably the most interesting observation for January was the large increase in the number of fin whale sightings compared to the previous month. Groups of one to four individuals were seen on eighteen occasions. There was a tendency for sightings to be concentrated around Ardmore Head, Waterford early in the month and Capel Island, Cork later in the month. Harbour porpoise were again seen regularly off Cork, Kerry, Dublin and Waterford. There were several reports of up to 45 common dolphins from Capel Island, Cork on 29th January. Finally there were two reports of bottlenose dolphins, with one pod of six seen in Cork harbour on 6th January and 20 seen off the Aran Islands on the 26th.

Sea Watch Foundation's project "Encouraging Public Participation in Cetacean Monitoring" is supported BG International, Dong Eterforskning 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), by e-mailing <info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk> or by calling Sea Watch on 01545 561227.