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**SPECIES FACT SHEET –**

# **Common Dolphin** *(Delphinus delphis)*

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*Photo © Peter GH Evans*

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### Measurements

**Length**

Newborn: 0.89-1.10 m

Full grown: Up to 2.50 m (males c. 6% larger than females)

**Weight**

Newborn: c. 8-10 kg

Full grown: Up to c. 200 kg

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### Identification

***At Sea***

Usually animated and very social; often breaches and bow-rides. Hourglass pattern of tan and grey on flanks; long slender beak.

***On Land***

General form slender. Small (diameter 3 mm) sharp-pointed teeth; total count: 80-110/80-110 (upper/lower jaw). Grooves in palate of the skull.

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### Description

***Head***

It has a slender, long beak that is demarcated from the melon with a visible crease between beak and melon. A dark stripe runs forward from the flipper to join the lip patch at a varying location on the underside of the beak.

***Body, Fin & Markings***

The common dolphin is one of the smallest of the true dolphins. The body is long and slender and the dorsal fin is tall, pointed, slightly recurved, and centrally placed. The fin often has a pale patch in the centre. The species can be confused with striped dolphin but the common dolphin's characteristic hourglass or criss-cross pattern on its flanks is a good distinguishing feature. This patch is tan or yellowish in colour before the dorsal fin, and pale grey behind, although it may be more muted on juveniles. The back is dark brownish-grey, and the belly is white. The flippers are recurved and pointed at the tips. There can be a pronounced hump on tail stock in front of anus, thought to be usually present in adult males.

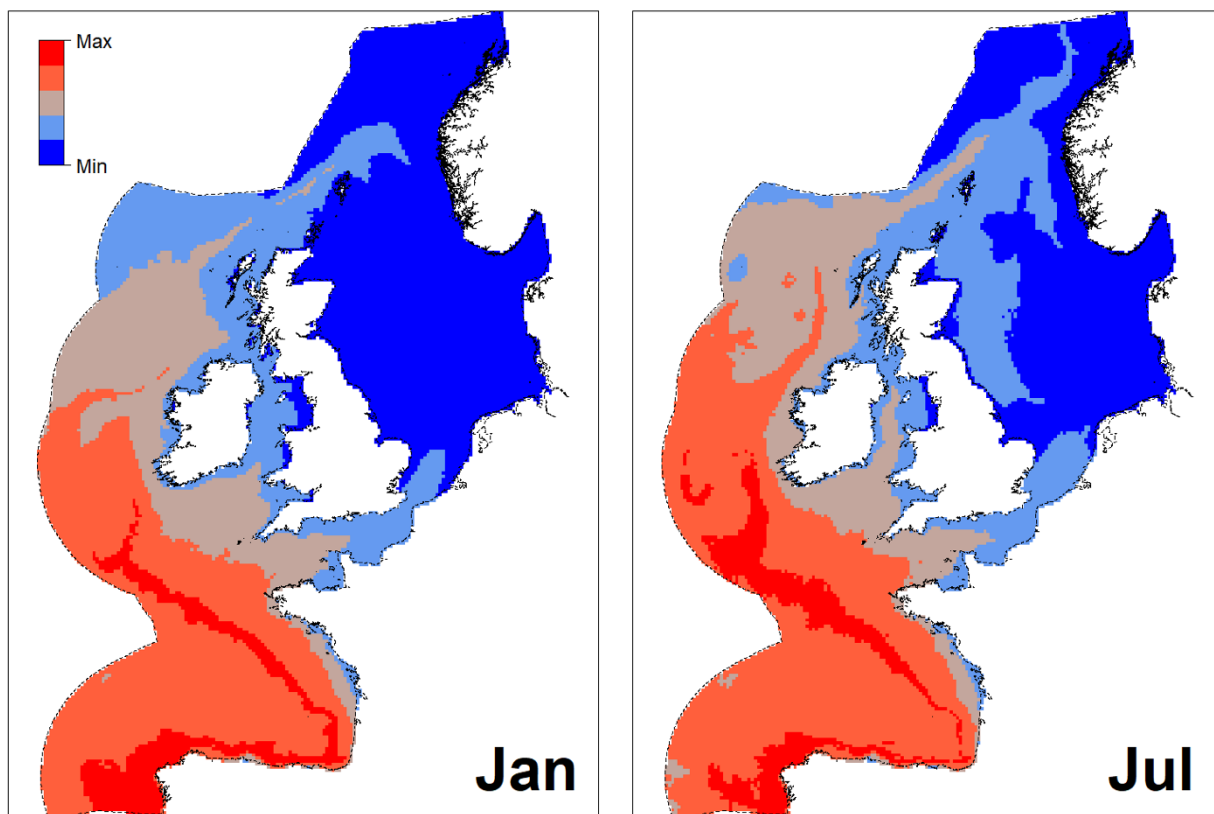
## Distribution

### *Global Distribution*

It is one of the most widely distributed and commonest species of cetaceans worldwide in both temperate and tropical waters of the Atlantic and Pacific.

### *European Waters*

In Europe, it inhabits temperate waters from the Iberian Peninsula to the Faroe Islands westward to at least the mid-Atlantic Ridge. It prefers areas of relatively high sea surface temperature, suggesting that in summer it could be distributed across entire North Atlantic, into the range of the western North Atlantic population. It is patchily distributed in the Mediterranean Sea.



*Overall Distribution of Common Dolphin around British Isles (Source: Waggitt et al., 2020)*

### *UK & Ireland*

In the British Isles, it is common in the western approaches to the Channel and deeper waters of the Irish Sea (particularly around the Celtic Deep) and around the Hebrides of West Scotland. It is common west of Ireland, and off the edge of the continental shelf it can be found north to a latitude of about 65°N. In recent years, the species has occurred further north and east in shelf seas - around Shetland and Orkney, and in the northern North Sea, reflecting changes in the strength of the Gulf Stream. Since the 1990s, the species has become regular in the northern North Sea and even enters the Baltic. In the UK, there appears to be a seasonal movement onto

the continental shelf between July and October. Range shifts may be related to changing oceanographic conditions (warmer sea temperatures and extensions of the range of potential prey species such as anchovy and sardine).

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## Abundance

Wide-scale surveys in summer 2016, covering the shelf seas of the eastern North Atlantic from southern Norway to Portugal yielded an estimated abundance of c. 480,000 common dolphins plus a further c. 150,000 dolphins unidentified to species but believed to be common rather than striped dolphin. The highest densities of common dolphins occurred in the south and west of Ireland, the Bay of Biscay, and around the Iberian Peninsula. The numbers counted in this survey were considerably higher than a decade earlier, suggesting an extensive movement into the areas surveyed.

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## Habitat

It is largely an oceanic species. In the North Atlantic, the species is most abundant along the continental shelf edge. Its distribution correlates with prominent undersea topography such as seamounts, sea escarpments, and continental slope waters. Most sightings in British and Irish waters occur at SSTs of 11.5-15°C, and overall North Atlantic range spans mainly waters of SSTs between 10 and 20°C.

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## Diet

Mainly pelagic, opportunistic feeders. Common dolphin diet is very varied, consisting chiefly of small schooling fish. In NW European seas, diet mainly consists of hake, horse mackerel, mackerel, sprat, sardine, anchovy and Norway pout. Other prey items include cod, scad, sand-eel, herring, whiting and blue whiting, as well as squid, the type of food taken depending on local availability. Groups of dolphins often use co-operative feeding techniques to herd schools of fish, panicking the fish through frenzied activity and taking them in the confusion.

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## Behaviour

Common dolphins are gregarious, often found in large, active schools. In British shelf seas, most groups consist of 6-15 individuals, and animals may also often occur solitarily or in pairs, although on occasions, schools of more than one hundred dolphins can be seen. Group sizes tend to be larger offshore along the shelf edge, and can number several hundred. They are often seen performing surface behaviours such as forward and side breaching, somersaults, and tail-smacking. They are highly vocal, emitting high-pitched squeals which often can be heard easily above the surface of the water. Common dolphins develop strong social bonds, particularly

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between mother and young, and between males and females; if one animal is captured or injured, the other will remain in attendance, and frequently shows much distress at its companion's plight, squeaking and squealing. There is evidence from bycatch and mass strandings that during both summer and winter, sexual segregation within populations may occur. Sexually mature females can be found solely with calves, while sexually immature males form separate groups or join mature male groups.

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### **Life History**

In the NE Atlantic, reproduction is seasonal with mating and calving mainly between May and September. The gestation period is 10-11 months. Other females may assist the mother with the birth and also take part in 'baby-sitting' while the mother feeds. They are weaned at the age of around 19 months, and the mother has a resting period of about four months before her next pregnancy so that calving intervals are generally 2-4 years or more. Males become sexually mature at 11-12 years of age, and females at around 8-10 years. Common dolphins can live to 30 years.

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### **Conservation Threats**

The main threat to the species in the NE Atlantic appears to be fisheries by-catch. In spring 2019, more than one thousand common dolphins with evidence of bycatch stranded on the French Biscay coast, and around five hundred two years earlier. Due to the fact that common dolphins often prey on the same species as the fisheries, they are a prime victim of accidental capture.

Although there is no evidence of serious organochlorine contamination in eastern North Atlantic common dolphins, specimens from the Atlantic coast of France have been found with high levels of methyl mercury (max 631 µg/g dry weight in the liver), with levels of total mercury increasing with age.

There is some indication that common dolphins react negatively to loud sounds produced by seismic and sonar activity. It has been suggested that mid-frequency sonar used by vessels during a naval exercise may have been the indirect cause of a mass stranding in SW England in June 2008. It is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

**ICUN status:** Least Concern.

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