



**SPECIES FACT SHEET –**

# **Harbour Porpoise** ***(Phocoena phocoena)***

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*Photo © Pia Anderwald*

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## Measurements

### Length

Newborn: 0.65-0.85 m  
Full grown: Up to 1.90 m

### Weight

Newborn: 6-10 kg  
Full grown: Up to 81 kg

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## Identification

### *At Sea*

Rarely leaps clear of water; normal view is glimpse of dark back and small centrally placed triangular fin. Characteristic forward-rolling behaviour when at surface.

### *On Land*

General form small and rotund, with small head. Flattened spade-shaped teeth. Total count: 38-56/38-56 (upper/lower jaw).

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## Description

### *Head*

It has a small head with no obvious forehead or beak. A straight mouthline slopes upwards towards the eye. The lips are dark, with a dark grey stripe of variable width between the gape and the flipper. The throat often has a series of dark streaks from the lip patch back to area between the flippers.

### *Body, Fin & Markings*

It is rotund in shape, with a small triangular wide-based dorsal fin which shows briefly above the surface - usually little of the animal is seen, as it rarely leaves the water entirely. The dorsal fin is centrally placed on the back. It has a dark grey back with paler grey patch on flank and a white belly, though colouration on back and sides varies. The flippers are small and somewhat rounded at the tips. The tail flukes have a prominent median notch and a concave trailing edge.

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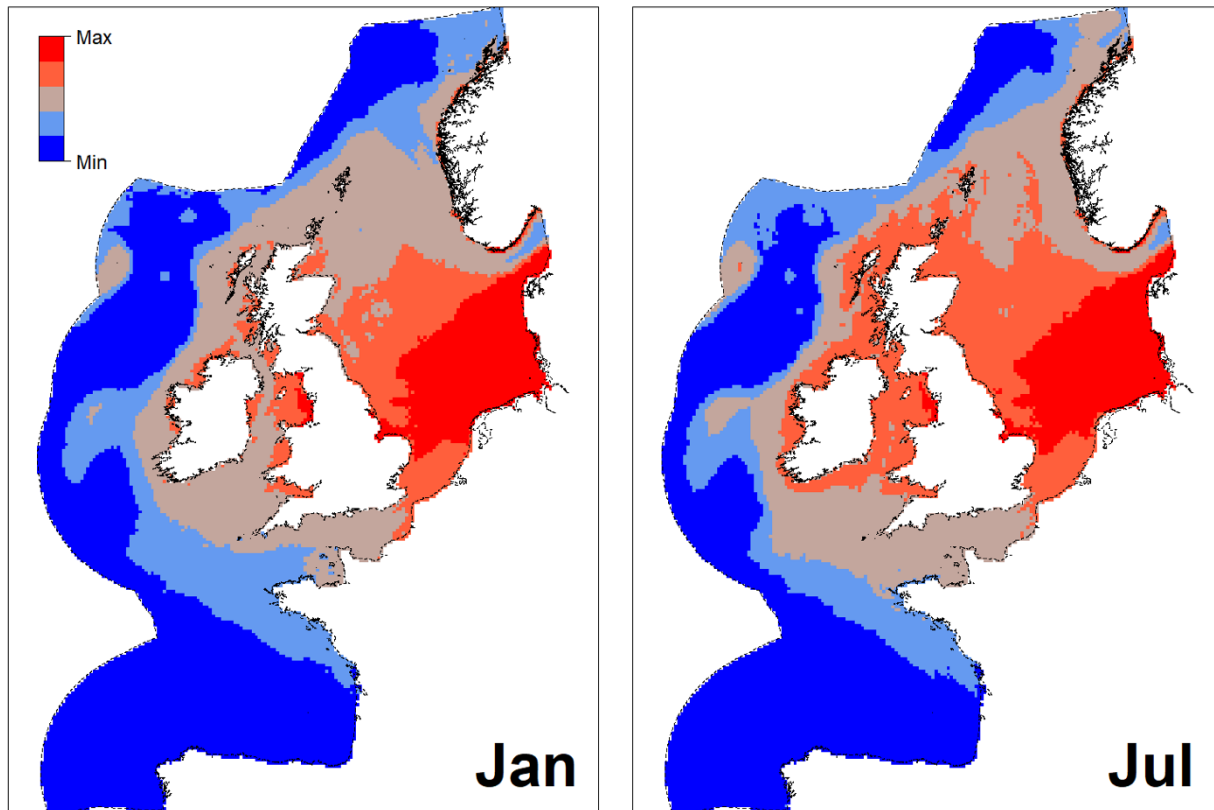
## Distribution

### ***Global Distribution***

The harbour porpoise is restricted to the temperate and sub-arctic (mainly 11-14°C) seas of the northern hemisphere, occurring in both the Atlantic and Pacific. In the North Atlantic, the species occurs mainly from central west Greenland and Novaya Zemlya south to North Carolina and Senegal.

### ***European Waters***

It is the commonest and most widely distributed species of cetacean in northern European seas. It ranges over the continental shelf from the Barents Sea and Iceland south to the coasts of France and Spain. A major population exists in the North Sea. It is rare in the Mediterranean but occurs in the Black Sea. A small endangered population inhabits the Baltic Sea. There appear to be 11 geographically discrete populations of harbour porpoise in NW European waters.



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

### ***UK & Ireland***

There are seasonal concentrations of harbour porpoises off south-west and western Ireland, west Wales, the west coast of Scotland, Northern Isles, and eastern Scotland where porpoises may be permanent residents in these areas. Since the 1990s, a significant portion of the population in the North Sea has shifted its range southwards to waters off eastern and south-east England.

## 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. 493,205 harbour porpoises with highest densities in the North Sea, which is a globally important habitat. The estimated number in the northern North Sea from 1994-2016 declined, whereas in the central and southern North Sea it increased. This is thought to represent a southward shift in distribution rather than actual changes in population size. In the 1970s it became scarce in the southernmost North Sea, English Channel, and Bay of Biscay. Since the 1990s, it has returned to these areas.

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## Habitat

As the name suggests, the harbour porpoise is a species commonly seen in coastal areas, although it ranges over much of the European continental shelf. It is the commonest and most widely distributed of all cetacean species in northern Europe, favouring comparatively shallow, cold waters. In European seas, it is common and widely distributed over the continental shelf (mainly at depths of 20-200 m), although telemetry studies have shown that animals from West Greenland migrate seasonally into deep waters of the central North Atlantic.

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## Diet

The harbour porpoise is a mainly benthic forager that eats a varied diet of fish, cephalopods, and crustaceans, related to local availability of food. In European waters, herring, sprat, pouts, sand-eel, gobies and a wide range of gadoid fish such as cod, saithe, and whiting are all known to form prey of porpoises.

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## Behaviour

Porpoises tend to be relatively solitary (typically 1-3 individuals, including mother-calf pairs), although aggregations in the tens or even low hundreds have been observed on occasions, generally associated with concentrations of prey or long-distance movements. Harbour porpoises do not usually approach boats or bow ride, although they can be observed at close quarters from a dinghy or small inflatable boat, and in late summer may actually approach vessels. Occasionally they breach clear of the water either when actively feeding or attempting to mate.

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## Life History

The main mating season is mid to late summer, with births taking place 10-11 months later (usually between May and August, with a peak in June). The calf is weaned at 2-3 months, but will continue to rely on mothers' milk for up to 10 months. Calving interval is 1-2 years. Porpoises reach sexual maturity at 3-5 years and have a relatively short life span, usually no more than 12 years, although animals have been recorded up to 24 years of age. Survival rate for juveniles is unknown; for adults, it is 80-87%.

## Conservation Threats

The main threats to harbour porpoise are by-catch in fishing gear (mainly from bottom set gill nets and pelagic trawls), attacks by bottlenose dolphins, depletion of prey resources, physiological effects on reproduction and infectious disease potentially arising from high contaminant levels (particularly PCBs). The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

**IUCN status:** Globally: Least Concern. Baltic Sea population: Critically Endangered.

## References

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