



SPECIES FACT SHEET –

Sowerby's Beaked Whale *(Mesoplodon bidens)*



Photo © Justin Hart

Measurements

Length

Newborn: c. 2.4 m
Full grown: c. 4.5-5.5 m
(males c. 0.5 m longer than females)

Weight

Newborn: 185 kg
Full grown: c. 1,000-1,400 kg

Identification

At Sea

Rarely seen at sea. Long, slender beak with a prominent forehead bulge, and spindle shaped body. Wide-based recurved dorsal fin almost two-thirds along the back. Sowerby's beaked whales are often difficult to distinguish from other *Mesoplodon* species.

On Land

Moderately arched lower jaw with 1 pair of laterally compressed triangular teeth. In males, there is a single pair of conspicuous teeth extruding from the middle of the beak. A prominent bulge often shows in front of the crescent shaped blowhole.

Description

Head

Sowerby's beaked whale has a prominent long and slender beak. It has a small head with a slightly concave forehead. The mouthline is typically straight but there may be a very slight arch to the lower jaw. The two flattened, triangular tusks of adult males erupt from the lower jaw, about two-thirds back from the tip of the beak, and are visible outside the closed mouth. There is a single pair of shallow throat grooves.

Body, Fin & Markings

The body is long and slender tapering towards the tail. Colouration is usually dark grey with a somewhat lighter belly. Scarring, usually light spots and scratches, may be seen scattered along the back in older animals. Juveniles are more uniformly coloured. The species has relatively narrow flippers which are often tucked into flipper pockets. Tail flukes are tapered, with no median notch.

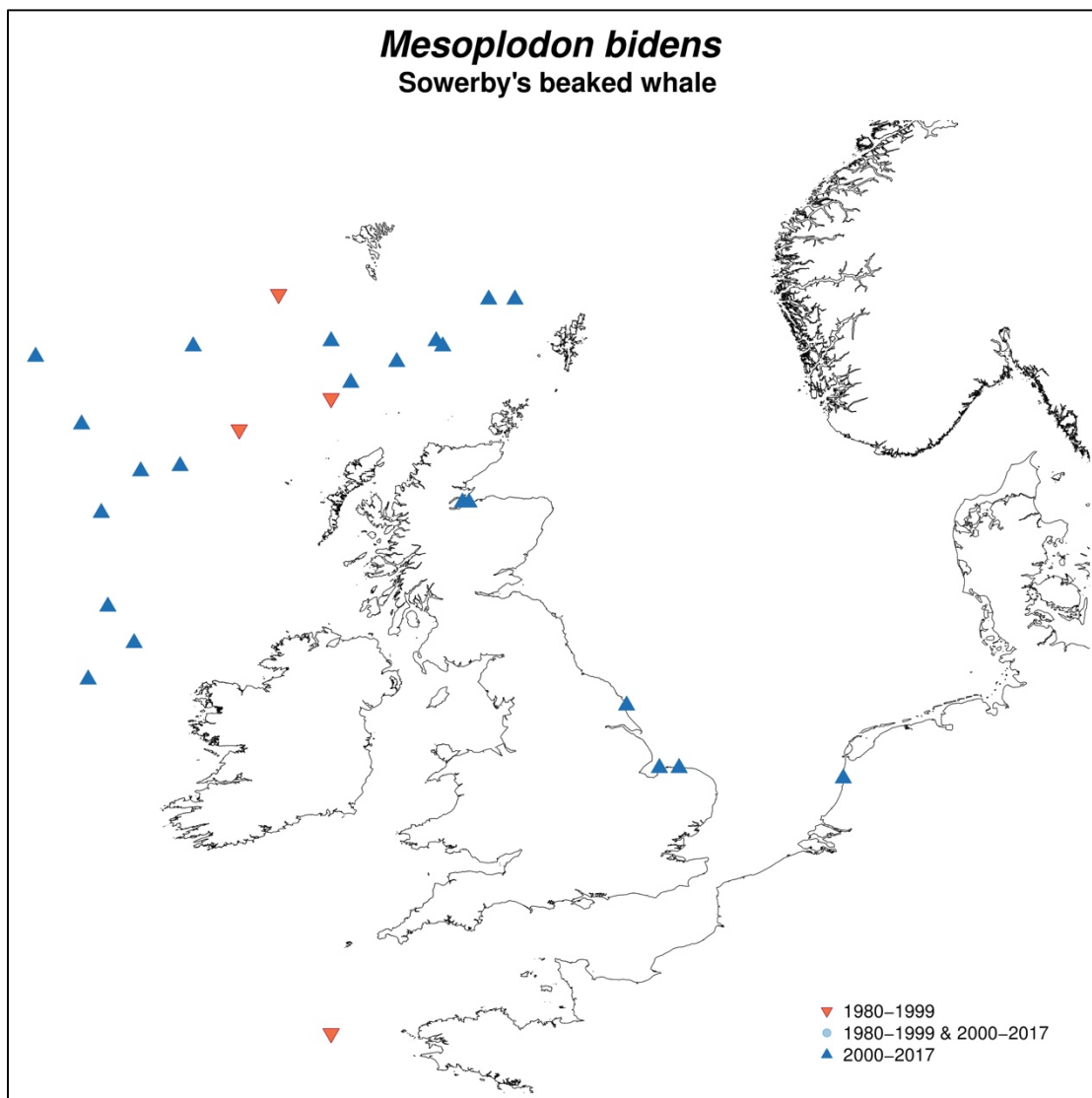
Distribution

Global Distribution

They are only observed from the temperate North Atlantic, mainly in European waters. They are assumed to be centred on deep waters of mid and eastern North Atlantic. The range extends from at least Massachusetts to Labrador in the west and from NW Africa to northern Norway in the east.

European Waters

In Northern Europe, there have been confirmed sightings from south of Iceland, the Norwegian Sea and west of Norway, around the Faroes, north and west of British Isles, in the Channel Approaches, and in the Bay of Biscay.



Sowerby's beaked whale sightings around British Isles (Source: Evans & Waggitt, 2020)

UK & Ireland

Sowerby's beaked whales have rarely been seen in shelf seas of the UK and Ireland; in contrast, there have been c. 100 strandings around the British Isles, since the UK stranding scheme started in 1913. These occurred mainly in the Northern Isles and north & west Scotland and along the east coast of England, and the English Channel. There have also been a number of strandings in western Ireland and mainland European coasts surrounding the North Sea. These strandings occurred mostly between July-November. Acoustic detections west of Ireland indicate a widespread distribution with a high occurrence off NW Ireland, particularly in the month of May.

Abundance

Due to their pelagic distribution and difficulty to observe and identify at sea, there are no population estimates for Sowerby's beaked whale, but they appear to be relatively uncommon.

Habitat

Bycatches on the shelf edge of the northwest Atlantic and sightings suggest that Sowerby's beaked whales mostly inhabit deep ocean basins and trenches with depths of 700+ m.

Diet

Not well known. They are believed to favour mesopelagic squid. Small numbers of otoliths from fish (e.g. cod) have also been found in the stomachs of some strandings.

Behaviour

Very poorly known. They are generally observed as single individuals or mothers with calves. Groups of 3-10 have been sighted. Due to scarring and development of teeth, intraspecific aggression is believed to occur between males. Fast swimmers, they are often observed at the surface. Recorded dives last 12-28 minutes. Observed behaviours include breaching, spy-hopping, and tail slapping. They may often bring their beak up out of the water at a 45° angle when surfacing.

Life History

Little is known about the life history of Sowerby's beaked whale. Mating and birth believed to occur in late winter and spring. Currently there are no data on gestation period, lactation period, or calving interval, and no data on life expectancy.

Conservation Threats

Threats are not well known but are assumed to be similar to other beaked whales. The main threat is likely disturbance from underwater noise such as naval mid-frequency active sonar. Some animals have been recorded entangled in fishing gear. The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

IUCN status: Data Deficient.

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