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**SPECIES FACT SHEET –**

**Risso's Dolphin**  
***(Grampus griseus)***

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*Photo © Peter GH Evans*

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## Measurements

### Length

Newborn: c. 1.35 m

Full grown: 3.5-4.0 m

### Weight

Newborn: c. 20 kg

Full grown: 350-400 kg

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## Identification

### *At Sea*

Rounded head, tall curved centrally-placed dorsal fin, often pale head and back with white scratches. Tall fin can cause observers to misidentify as killer whale.

### *On Land*

General form stout. Peg-like teeth. Total tooth count: 0 (occasionally 2-4)/4-14 (usually 8) (upper/lower jaw). Vertical groove on front of melon.

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## Description

### *Head*

The head is blunt, and rounded with a slight melon and no beak. There is a deep V-shaped crease down the middle and front of the head from the blowhole to the upper lip, only seen close up. There are peg-like teeth at the tip of lower jaw. The mouthline slopes upward towards eye.

### *Body, Fin & Markings*

It has a stout torpedo-shaped body narrowing behind dorsal fin to quite narrow tail stock. The body colouration is dark to light grey on back and flanks, getting paler with age. Older individuals are often white. The white belly enlarges to an oval or anchor-shaped patch on the chest and chin. There is a white patch of variable extent also around the urogenital area. There are many conspicuous white scars on flanks of adults. The dorsal fin is relatively tall, slender and recurved (often pointed at tip), lightening with age, particularly along the leading edge. The long, pointed recurved flippers show similarities to the pilot whales. The body tapers to the more slender tail stock. Young animals are relatively unmarked, and vary from light-grey to dark brownish-grey colouration, but often have a distinct cape that extends down over the eye, and dips slightly below the dorsal fin.

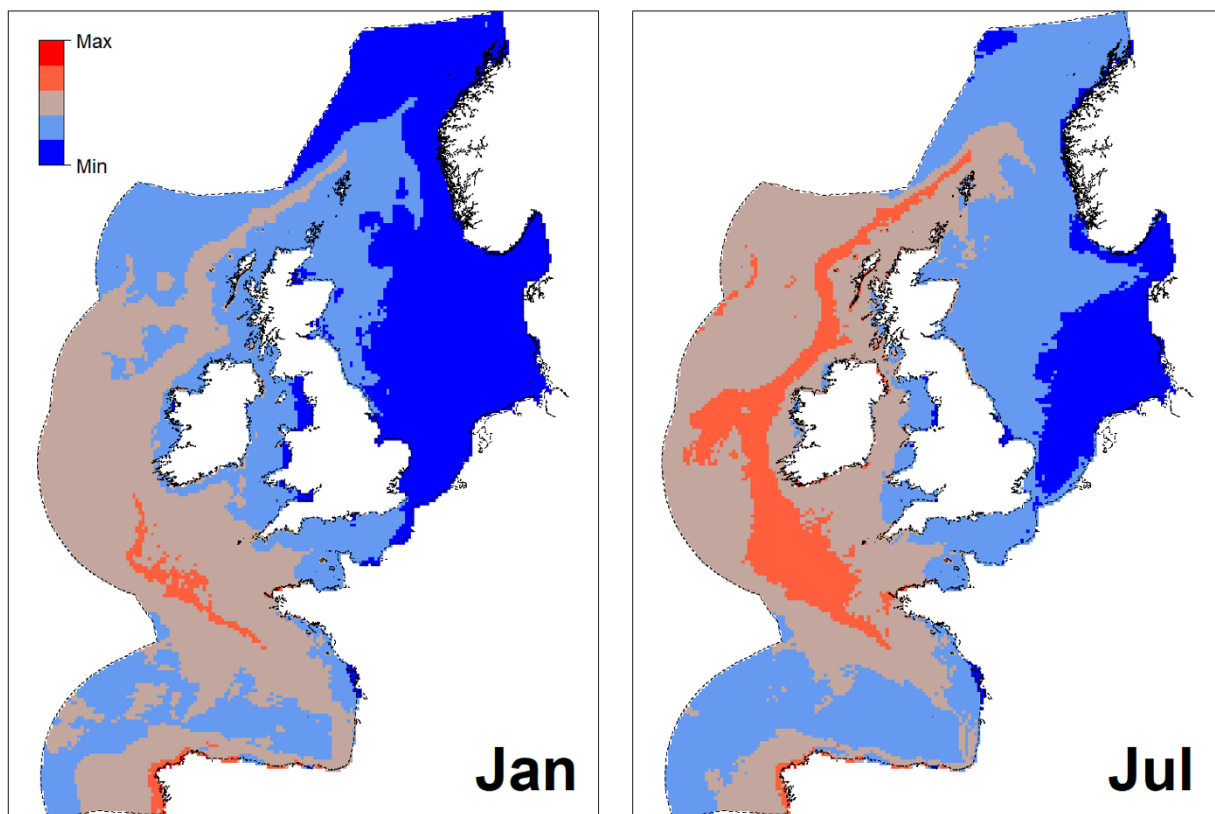
## Distribution

### **Global Distribution**

It occurs in all oceans between 60°N and 60°S; it prefers waters warmer than 10-12°C, and does not occur in polar regions.

### **European Waters**

In the North-east Atlantic, the main range of the Risso's dolphin is from the tropics north to the Shetland Isles, Scotland. In mainland Europe, the species is present in west France, the southern Bay of Biscay, all around the Iberian Peninsula, and in the Mediterranean Sea. Major populations exist around the oceanic archipelagos of the Azores, Madeira and Canaries.



*Overall Distribution of Risso's Dolphin in British Isles (Source: Waggitt et al., 2020)*

### **UK & Ireland**

In British waters, the major populations occur in the Hebrides, and the species is regular in small numbers in Shetland, Orkney and NE Scotland, in the Irish Sea (particularly off the coasts of Co. Wexford, west of Pembrokeshire, around NW Wales and the Isle of Man), and around western Ireland, particularly the south-west. In recent years, it has been seen regularly off east Scotland. In the English Channel, it occurs mainly in the western part off the Cornish coast, although it is also a regular visitor to the Channel Islands. Sightings may occur any time of year, but in coastal waters the species is most often seen between April and September.

## Abundance

The species does not appear to be common anywhere in the Atlantic. A wide-scale survey spanning NW European shelf seas from southern Norway to Portugal estimated c. 16,200 individuals in summer 2016.

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## Habitat

The species favours continental slope waters in depths of 200-1,200 metres, although in the British Isles it is frequently found over slopes of 50-100 m depth. It tends to dive deeply to forage. It generally favours continental slope waters, and oceanic island archipelagos.

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## Diet

The species is mainly a benthic forager. The diet includes primarily cephalopods, particularly octopus, cuttlefish, and various small squid. It will occasionally take small fish such as cod.

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## Behaviour

It forms pods of 2-50 animals (most commonly 6-12 in British waters), although it may be seen in groups of several hundreds to thousands. Groups appear to be stable over the long term, with weak associations formed. Juveniles stay in the vicinity of their natal group for some years after being weaned and form bachelor pods of sub-adults at age 6-8 years. Inter-annual site fidelity has been observed. It will associate with other cetaceans; wild hybrids of bottlenose and Risso's dolphins have been reported. At times, it will display aggressive behaviour towards other cephalopod-eating species such as sperm, pilot, and false killer whale. During daytime, Risso's dolphins frequently socialise, rest or travel. Dives may last 8-12 min during foraging, surfacing for 5-10 min. Relatively slow swimmer (travel speed 5-8 km/hr). Behaviours include breaching, head slapping, lob-tailing, spy-hopping, tail and flipper slapping. Foraging mainly occurs during late afternoon and overnight. Their extensive scarring is thought to be related to observations of male-male aggression. whilst large testes suggest sperm competition among males.

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## Life History

Poorly known. The age at sexual maturity is 8-10 years in females and 10-12 years in males. The gestation period is 13-14 months, and the calving interval is thought to be 2-4 years. The life span is usually c. 25 years; the max. recorded is 34 years but is likely to be more. Calving off British Isles occurs mainly between March and July.

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## Conservation Threats

Threats to Risso's dolphin in Atlantic Europe are not well known but are thought to include bycatch in fishing gear, prey depletion, and underwater noise disturbance. Elsewhere, the species has occasionally been killed directly, mainly as a result of dolphins stealing fish from longlines, or in multispecies cetacean fisheries in the eastern Caribbean, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. Drive fisheries occur in Japan and the species has occasionally been taken in the Faroe Islands. Risso's dolphins are sometimes taken for captive display. The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

**IUCN status:** Globally - Least Concern. North Atlantic: Data Deficient.

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