



# Orca Watch 2023

## Responsible watchers



### Our mission

When plans were announced to install underwater turbines in the Pentland Firth, Sea Watch Regional Coordinator Colin Bird set up a seasonal watch to understand how this might impact orca (and other wildlife in the area), and Orca Watch was born.

Orca Watch was created out of necessity to protect wildlife from human disturbance. However, protecting these species does not just happen after data collection, but during it. Throughout Orca Watch we also need to be careful to ensure the local area is not disturbed by the influx of passionate wildlife enthusiasts.

Partnering with **OMMRI**, this year Orca Watch's theme is: Responsible Watchers. Through this we aim to honour the original mission set out by Colin Bird to protect the wildlife around John O'Groats. This document will help you to understand how to follow the best practices for wildlife watching while taking part in Orca Watch.

## What do we mean by responsible watchers?

This year we want all our volunteers and everyone who is visiting John O'Groats, and further afield, for Orca Watch to honour the best practices in wildlife watching. In Scotland, it is expected that you follow the **Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code** and the **Scottish Outdoor Access Code** at all times whether you are watching from land or at sea.

During the excitement of searching for Orca it is easy to get carried away and slip into bad habits but remember these animals are not here for our entertainment and it is a privilege to be able to witness them going about their daily lives in the wild. Responsible watchers should always abide by three priorities:

- **Keep your distance.**
- **Leave no trace.**
- **Respect the community.**

### Watching from boats

While on ferries or tours around John O'Groats and Orkney make sure you are always respectful to crew members and adhere to their safety measures at all times. If you are not an Orca Watch volunteer please also be aware that volunteers are at work conducting surveys during the trip.

If you choose to take a boat out during Orca Watch always keep a safe distance from wildlife. Before you get on the water, read **A Guide to Best Practice for Watching Marine Wildlife**, and follow their guidelines.

Keep an eye out for signs of disturbance. According to NatureScot these could be:

- **Individuals grouping closer together.**
- **Increased tail or head slaps.**
- **Increased movement speed.**
- **Surfacing less often after diving.**
- **Females moving to get between their calf and the boat.**

When you spot an animal slow down and assess the situation. Always approach an animal from their side. When you get within 1km - 300m of an animal slow down to make sure the animal is given ample warning of your presence. It is generally agreed that you should never get closer than:

- **50 metres for dolphins and porpoises.**
- **100 metres for whales.**
- **200–400 metres for mothers and calves, and animals that are actively feeding or swimming steadily in one direction.**

If you find yourself unexpectedly close to an animal slow down or stop, and put the engine into neutral, to let them pass. Do not linger for too long around marine wildlife. Experts agree that you can spend up to 30 minutes with a group of animals if you are alone in the water, and 15 if there are other boats close by. If you see a vessel that is clearly not adhering to the guidelines please let us know.

## **Watching from land**

Watching from land is the least invasive way to conduct marine surveys and often offers the best views. However, remember that you are in a terrestrial habitat. Make sure to read the local guidance about interacting with wildlife in the area. To enter an area always use a gate where possible. Do not make excess noise and always keep a respectful distance from wildlife, especially if there are nesting/breeding birds in the area. Please do not enter fields with cattle or sheep as this is an important time of year for lambs and calves. If you have a close-up orca experience while you are on land remember you still have to keep a safe distance. Do not try to get closer to get better footage.

It is vital not to disturb the watch site you are in. Make sure not to leave any litter behind. If you have a dog, keep your dog on a lead at all times while around animals. If you are driving remember that these roads are still being used by the community during Orca Watch. Please don't park your vehicle in an unsuitable spot (such as gateways, tracks or passing places) on the search for Orca.

## **Recreation**

During Orca Watch, John O'Groats will be busier than usual. We want Orca Watch to be an enjoyable week for the community to ensure that we can continue conducting Orca Watch in the future. Try to minimise disruption to the community wherever possible.

If you are swimming during Orca Watch make sure to be mindful of wildlife. It is never advisable to swim with wild animals as they are unpredictable and can be dangerous. Never knowingly get in the water around orca as they are highly dangerous predators. On walks stay on the paths provided where possible to minimise habitat disturbance. If you are wild camping make sure to choose a location that is not close to any priority habitats for wildlife, do not leave any litter behind and follow the **Scottish Outdoor Access Code for camping** at all times.

## **More resources**

If you would like to find out more about best practices for wildlife watching please consult the following guides produced by NatureScot:

[A Guide to Best Practice for Watching Marine Wildlife](#)

[The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code](#)

[The Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)